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School of Oriental and African Studies
University of London

“Fiesta de Diez Pesos”:
Music as a Space for Identity, Interaction, and Escapism,
among Gay Men in Special Period Havana

Moshe Morad



Thesis submitted to the University of London
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
July 12, 2012

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Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between music and gay identity in Havana during the *período especial*, an extended period of economic depression starting in the early 1990s, characterised by a collapse of revolutionary values and social norms, and a way of life conducted by improvised solutions for survival, including hustling and sex-work.

A thriving, though constantly harassed and destabilised, clandestine gay “scene” has developed in Havana. During eight different visits between 1995 and 2007, I became absorbed in the scene, created a wide social network, attended numerous secret gatherings—from clandestine parties to religious rituals—observed patterns of behaviour and communication, and the way the scene changed and evolved.

I discovered the role of music in it as a marker of identity, a source of queer codifications and identifications, a medium of interaction, an outlet for emotion and a way to escape from a reality of scarcity, oppression and despair. I argue that music plays a central role in providing the physical, emotional, and conceptual spaces which constitute this scene and in the formation of a new hybrid “gay identity” in Special-Period Havana. My methodology is based on gathering evidence *in situ* as a primary fieldwork tool, and drawing on local discourse both as a major source of information and as an important analytical tool. Anecdotal accounts are supported, tested, and verified through short surveys and many personal communications.

Recent publications about Cuban music in the Special Period discuss gender and sexuality, but hardly deal with homosexuality, whilst researches on homosexuality in Cuba hardly mention music. This thesis fills this gap and features an analysis of five musical “spaces” in Cuba from a “queer ethnomusicology” perspective. Furthermore, understanding the role of music in providing space for expression and identity-creation to a marginalised and stigmatised group, can offer pointers for deciphering similar processes in other societies.

Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	3
<i>Table of contents</i>	4
<i>Index of figures</i>	7
<i>Index of photographs</i>	7
 Preface	9
Acknowledgments.....	15
 Chapter 1 <i>Introduction</i>	18
 Chapter 2 <i>Literature review</i>	29
Cuban music.....	29
Cuban homosexuality.....	34
Gay/queer music.....	38
 Chapter 3 <i>Approach and theoretical background</i>	
Introduction	42
<i>The privileged parameter</i>	42
<i>Sameness</i>	43
The use of theory.....	44
Musical geography: music, space and place - a theoretical model.....	45
Structuring the ethnography according to spaces and levels of privacy.....	50
 Chapter 4 <i>In the field: Methodology and ethics</i>	
Introduction.....	55
Outsider/ insider.....	55
Subjectivity.....	57
Longitudinal fieldwork.....	58
Fieldwork challenges and strategy.....	66
A qualitative/quantitative mix.....	68
<i>Informal conversations and personal communications</i>	68
<i>Mini survey questionnaires</i>	70
Extra academic expertise applied in the field.....	71
Ethics in the field: from exposure to erotic subjectivity.....	72
 Chapter 5 <i>Special Period Havana: The musicscape, the ethnoscape, and the homoscape</i>	
Introduction.....	76
The city's soundscape and its musicscape.....	76
The ethnoscape.....	79
<i>Internal migration</i>	80
<i>Tourists/extranjeros</i>	81
<i>Jineterismo and "music jineterismo"</i>	83
The "homoscape": Havana's gay life in the 1990s – from <i>maricón</i> to "gay".....	87
<i>"Fresa y chocolate"</i>	94
<i>"El pecado original" and gay themes in nueva trova</i>	95
Conclusion.....	99

Chapter 6 <i>Fiestas de diez pesos, Part I: The scene and the queer</i>	
Introduction.....	101
My first <i>fiesta de diez pesos</i>	103
<i>Hanging out at the Malecón</i>	103
<i>The way to the fiesta</i>	106
<i>Finally there</i>	107
Changes in Havana's gay <i>fiestas</i> scene.....	110
Two kinds of <i>fiestas</i>	113
<i>The private home fiestas</i>	114
<i>The semi-public fiestas</i>	115
"Gay salsa": queering the Casino dancing-style.....	119
Queer <i>timba</i> : "Watch how the <i>locas</i> do the <i>despelote</i> ".....	123
"Re-gay-tón": Queering <i>reggaetón</i>	132
<i>The reggaetón dance style</i>	135
<i>The lyrics: Assigning new meanings</i>	139
House music: Gay and <i>internacional</i>	142
Conclusion.....	144
 Chapter 7 <i>Fiestas de diez pesos, Part II: "Dancing identity" (analysis)</i>	
Introduction.....	147
Gay dance music and its social aspects.....	148
<i>Fiesta</i> behaviour as ritual behaviour.....	152
" <i>Fiesta-psychology</i> " survey.....	158
The gay Cuban dancing body and the sensualisation of the dancefloor.....	160
"Gay musicality": A queer reading of musical elements of the featured genres.....	165
<i>Reggaetón's hybridity and duality</i>	165
<i>Tempo and rhythm</i>	170
<i>Repetitiveness and cyclicity</i>	171
<i>The "limping effect"</i>	174
<i>Multiple climaxes</i>	175
Conclusion.....	176
 Chapter 8 <i>Performance, performativity, and audience, Part I – "El chow": Drag shows and the Ballet Nacional</i>	
Introduction.....	179
Travesti <i>chow</i> (drag shows).....	181
<i>Description: Bar de Las Estrellas</i>	182
<i>Description: home drag fiesta</i>	183
<i>Drag politics and philosophy</i>	184
<i>Drag's status and social role in Special Period Havana</i>	187
<i>Divas and more</i>	187
<i>Camp sensibility</i>	188
<i>Collective identity</i>	189
<i>Acceptance</i>	189
<i>The role of music in Havana's drag shows: entertainment, identification, and protest</i>	190
The Ballet Nacional: "The most obvious discreet gay space in Havana".....	200
<i>The status of ballet in Cuba</i>	200
<i>Gaydar, space and "performance" in the audience</i>	202
Conclusion.....	204

Chapter 9 <i>Performance, performativity, and audience, Part II - Changó versus Santa Barbara: Santería ritual performance as a gay space.</i>	
Introduction.....	208
Description: A “gay” toque.....	208
Description: Il rito del cucillo (the ceremony of the knife).....	209
Santería and its music.....	212
Orisha worship.....	212
During the Special Period.....	214
The role of music.....	215
Homosexuality and santería.....	215
Terminology.....	215
Transgenderism.....	217
Femininity.....	219
“The fag religion”: Gays in santería.....	220
The role of EPH in santería performance.....	221
“Mi nueva familia” : Alternative kinship in santería.....	227
Secrecy, deviance and marginalisation.....	229
Sensuality and homoeroticism in the ritual dances.....	232
Spirit possession as a (homo)sexual metaphor.....	234
A controversial queer reading of <i>batá</i> drumming patterns.....	236
Yemayá and Changó: “protectors of gays”.....	240
Conclusion.....	245
 Chapter 10 “¡Yo soy el bolero!”: Queer appropriation and identification in the kitchen	
Introduction.....	252
“Bolero mode”: description of a bolero <i>fiesta</i>	256
Mapping <i>bolero</i> consumption: Demography, geography, psychology.....	258
Musical characteristics of bolero.....	261
<i>Bolero</i> lyrics : “Like a knife stuck in your heart”.....	265
Gender ambiguity.....	266
Central themes in bolero lyrics.....	270
“Bolero state-of-mind”: common themes in bolero and in gay psychologies.....	276
Melancholia.....	276
(Invented) nostalgia.....	278
Hysteria.....	279
Borders and liminality.....	281
Bolero’s gay icons.....	282
Bola de Nieve : “I am a sociable negro, intellectual, and chic”.....	283
The divas.....	286
Olga Guillot: “La vida es una mentira” (Life is a lie).....	288
La Lupe: a woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown.....	289
Conclusion.....	291
 Chapter 11 Conclusion: ¡Ya empezó la fiesta!” (The party has already begun!)”	295
 Bibliography.....	304
Filmography.....	341

Appendices

I: PersComs informants.....	342
II: Video.....	345
III: Audio.....	349
IV: Understanding Cuban homosexualities: From the Yoruba gender ambiguities, via transculturation, to revolutionary homophobia.....	350
V: Clifford Geertz's "Levels of Interpretation" theory in the context of this study.....	356
VI: The Buena Vista Social Club syndrome: a soundtrack of the "imagined community"	358
VII: Sacred <i>batá</i> drums--for heterosexual men only?	361
VIII: A historical perspective of homosexuality in santería.....	364
IX: Pello's transcriptions of <i>toques</i>	369

Index of figures:

Fig. 3.1 From public to private: Concentric circles of relative privacy.....	52
Fig. 4.1 Fieldwork trips.....	60
Fig. 4.2 Havana – Map: main fieldwork locations.....	61
Fig. 4.3 Havana's "gay area", Vedado.....	62
Fig. 6.1 Police observation points in the "gay" area	106
Fig. 6.2 <i>Son clave</i> and <i>rumba clave</i>	124
Fig. 7.1 Transcription: "Atrévete, te, te".....	167
Fig. 7.2 Transcription: "A mi mama me lo contó"	167
Fig. 7.3 Transcription: "Fresa y Chocolate".....	168
Fig. 7.4 Transcription: "Tierra Caliente".....	168
Fig. 7.5 Transcription: "A una loco como tú"	169
Fig. 7.6 Transcription: Excerpt of a <i>toque</i> for the <i>orisha</i> Osain (Schweitzer)...	172
Fig. 7.7 Transcription: Reduction of parts. (Schweitzer).....	172
Fig. 7.8 Transcription: "I Feel Love".....	173
Fig. 7.9 Transcription: "Atrévete, te, te" - "limping effect"	175
Fig. 10.1 <i>Cinquillo</i>	261
Fig. 10.2 Sheet notes "La Tarde" (from Grenet 1939)	263
Fig. 10.3 Transcription: Olga Guillot "La Mentira"	264
Fig. 10.4 Transcription: La Lupe "Puro Teatro"	264

Index of photos:

Cover: *Fiesta de diez pesos* (top), home drag show (bottom)
[both photos taken by author, Havana 2005]

0.1 Police harassment	17
0.2 Tolerance.....	17
4.1, 4.2 The Malecón.....	63
4.3 The Yara cinema.....	63
4.4, 4.5 The Malecón gay area.....	64
4.6 The Malecón gay area.....	65
4.7 Bim bom ice-cream parlour.....	65

5.1 <i>Timba</i> show.....	86
5.2 <i>Reggaetón</i> show.....	86
6.1, 6.2 Home <i>fiesta</i>	116
6.3, 6.4 Big semi-public <i>fiesta</i>	117
6.5 <i>Extranjeros</i> at big semi-public <i>fiesta</i>	118
6.6 Dancer and drag queen at a home <i>fiesta</i>	118
6.7 Fashion brands at the <i>fiesta</i>	118
6.8, 6.9, 6.10, 6.11 Gay salsa.....	122
6.12 Baby Lores.....	135
6.13 Residente.....	135
6.14 <i>Reggaetón perreo</i> dance-style.....	138
6.15, 6.16, 6.17 Gay <i>perreo</i>	138
7.1 (left) <i>casino</i> -style salsa.....	165
7.2 (right) Gay boy dancing <i>reggaetón</i>	165
8.1, 8.2 Drag show at Bar de Las Estrellas.....	197
8.3 Drag show at Bar de Las Estrellas.....	198
8.4 Home drag show.....	198
8.5 Drag queen Kiriam.....	199
8.6 Drag queen Gloria.....	199
8.7 Yasmani (“Brunette”) after the performance.....	199
8.8 Drag queen and Fidel Castro image.....	199
8.9 Gran Teatro de La Habana.....	206
8.10 Cuban ballet superstar Carlos Acosta.....	206
8.11 Tommy , ex-ballet teacher, host of home <i>fiestas</i>	206
8.12, 8.13 Ballet dancers rehearsing.....	207
8.14 Gay Cuban ballet dancers and informants.....	207
9.1 <i>Batá</i> drums set.....	248
9.2, 9.3 Changó image.....	248
9.4 <i>bembé</i> in old Havana.....	249
9.5 improvised percussion instrument in a <i>toque</i>	249
9.6 <i>Adés</i> in <i>Candomblé</i>	249
9.7 “Gaydar” at the ceremony of the knife.....	250
9.8 The ceremony of the knife.....	250
9.9 Ceremonial cake and sacrificed animals’ entrails.....	250
9.10 Author with Lourdes, <i>santería</i>	251
9.11 Author with Miguelito, <i>santero</i> and initiate.....	251
9.12 “ <i>Santería</i> fashion”	251
10.1, 10.2 Bola de nieve.....	283
10.3, 10.4 Olga Guillot.....	288
10.5, 10.6 La Lupe.....	289
11.1 2010: Gay parade in Havana.....	303
11.2 Policeman at gay beach.....	303
11.3 Rainbow flag in Old Havana.....	373

Preface

I am writing this as I am drafting the first version of this thesis, sitting on the Malecón, the seaside promenade, “the sofa of Havana” as many *habaneros* call it, at dusk on 12 May 2010, watching the sky darkening over the city which had become my second “emotional” home in the last fifteen years. In a couple of days the third “Day against Homophobia” organised by the state’s sexual education centre, will take place. Posters claiming: “Homosexuality is NOT dangerous, Homophobia IS!” are being displayed in shop windows in central Havana streets.¹

Much has changed in Cuba since I started my journey of research into the role of music in the lives of gays in Havana. Though attitudes towards homosexuality have become more liberal, things are far from being perfect, to put it mildly, for my many gay friends here and for the young gay guys sitting aimlessly next to me, waiting for the next tourist to approach them while trying to avoid the vigilant eyes of the patrolling policemen. From the other side of the street I can hear a sultry bolero from the balcony of Aurelio, one of my main informants, still finding refuge in his music. I can imagine him impersonating the singer Olga Guillot in his small kitchen while cooking a black-market lobster for his evening guests, just as he did when I first entered his flat fifteen years ago.

My first visit to Havana was in 1994, during the height of the economic crisis. There were few incoming flights to Havana, and food was scarce. My Cuban friends admitted that they had not tasted meat for weeks and had no milk either, as milk was supplied only by rations to households with children under age of seven. Coincidentally this was also a landmark year for Cuban gays during which there was an attempt to create a “gay rights” manifesto, one of Cuba’s most respected artists dedicated a song to “*los gays*” denouncing homophobia, and a popular film had taken Cuban homosexuality out of the closet.²

Still, 16 years later, the expected change in the official attitude towards the gay

¹ See photo 0.2

² See Chapter 5

community has not come, and everything in the gay scene, known in code as *el ambiente*³ remained “hush hush”, under threat, and suffering from police harassment for many years to come. Whereas Hernandez-Reguant, in her essay “Multicubanidad” mentions (albeit, only in a footnote) gay culture and identity as one aspect of the cultural diversity evolving in Havana during the Special Period (2009:87), Zurbano rightfully points out that the city’s police officers, who generally come from rural areas are not familiar with the dynamics of the city and its diverse cultural identities (including gays), therefore “confuse these differences with marginal or possibly delinquent behaviors” (2009:152). Indeed, rather than the Cuban society, or even the regime as a whole that was, especially towards the late 1990s, trying to come to terms with homosexuality, Havana’s gay scene’s biggest “enemy” during the Special Period was the police, constantly watching, threatening, restricting its movements, harassing its subjects, and pushing its visibility and activities “into the dark”, thus partially responsible for its “clandestine” character.⁴

Walking outside my hotel, back in 1994, followed by the suspicious eyes of the security guard, I ventured into a dark park at the entrance to Habana Vieja (Old Havana). There I met Adrián, a twenty-year-old gay man who was to become one of my main informants and a friend for life. We arranged to meet the next evening near my hotel. We could not meet in the lobby or go up to my room, as Cubans were not allowed into tourist hotels. We walked *a la calle* (in the streets), where most *habaneros* meet and socialise. Every time a policeman passed by, Adrián immediately kept away from me for fear that the policeman might ask for his documents, as locals were not supposed to hang out with foreigners.⁵ But then suddenly, when he noticed that I started whistling with a Cuban dance tune coming out of an open window, a smile appeared on his face: “You like

³ *El ambiente*, (the ambience, the milieu, the environment) is a code word used throughout the Latin world for something similar to a “gay scene” or “gay space” in Eurocentric societies, however, more hybrid and more varied, as will be shown in this dissertation and in many cases, as in the case of Cuba, more clandestine and discreet in nature. In Cuba the term was used years before the revolution to indicate “the scene” (Lumsden 1996:33-35) and “*de ambiente*” to indicate someone’s gayness, and is still in use. The term better describes the particular character of the Havana gay scene – informal, clandestine, multiple and ambiguous.

In his book *Images of ambiente*, Bleys claims the term *ambiente* “better captures the diversity of (homo)sexual life [in Latin America], the simultaneous coexistence of various patters of sexual behavior and identity. Its somewhat vague, implicit character also allows for describing the changing outlook of Latin American homosexual life through time.” (2000:8)

⁴ See photo 0.1

⁵ See photo 0.1

Cuban music? Let's go to a *fiesta* tonight. I will find out where it is. There we can do what we want and be together without policemen watching us." His eyes lit up when he spoke about the *fiesta* and he went on telling me:

The situation is *mierdas* [shit] here, especially for us [gays], but when I am in the *fiesta* [party] it all changes for one night. ... Once the music starts I don't feel hungry anymore, or humiliated, or that I am a little frightened *maricón* [faggot] running away from the police... I feel myself. I feel free. I feel happy. (PersCom⁶ 1994)

"Now, where can one find a gay party in a city with not even one gay bar and where gays gatherings are not allowed, and the police is present everywhere?" "Don't worry," he said. "It's Friday night. Let's go to the Yara [a cinema in Vedado]. All the taxi drivers there will know where the *fiesta* is." Taxi drivers in Havana seem to know a lot. I was confused and intrigued.

The next morning my confusion grew even more. While I was having a *mojito* in the Cathedral Square with a man who had been put in a labour camp in 1967 for being gay, I was outraged to hear that HIV carriers are being put in quarantine, and that men are not allowed to touch one another in public. However, I suddenly caught sight of a group of transvestites walking in full drag in broad daylight, blowing kisses at local men and policemen to everyone's amusement.

These were my first experiences of what I always describe as "the Cuban gay paradox". Just like many students who attend my lectures on the subject, my initial assumption was that Cuban society is intolerant and homophobic, but I soon discovered that my preconception was superficial and lacked nuance. The Havana clandestine gay scene is thriving and complex, characterised by a paradoxical combination of secret and "in your face" behaviour.

Originally I chose to come to Havana for its music. Being gay, I was also interested in meeting locals and experiencing gay life on the island. Soon I discovered an interesting connection between my two passions. Getting to know an increasing number of local gays and immersing myself in the *ambiente*, I came across a world saturated with music. I was intrigued by the power of music to provide a much needed space for expression, identity, dreams, and hopes.

⁶ PersCom = personal communication. I will use this abbreviation throughout the dissertation to indicate quotes from informal yet informative personal conversations with informants, one of my main fieldwork methodologies. See chapter 4.

My initial discovery fermented in my mind, compelling me to return to Havana a year later, equipped with notebooks, some addresses and telephone numbers, and much curiosity. I started my fieldwork by creating an ever-growing social network. For the next twelve years, I kept returning every one or two years for three-to six-week periods, following the changes as they developed, and getting to know more by winning the friendship and the confidence of an increasing number of people, some of whom became long-term friends, as well as important informants. It has been a long journey crammed with adventures, risks (for me as well as for my informants), frustrations at times, and ample emotional moments.

Many times throughout my fieldwork, I have experienced the strength of the much-discussed pairing of “music and identity”, causing me to lose any drop of cynicism towards this overused term. In 1994, the year I first visited Cuba, Martin Stokes published his groundbreaking book and one of my main sources of inspiration, *Ethnicity, Identity and Music*. A sentence from it resonated in my head when attending my first gay *fiestas* in Havana: “Music...provides means by which people recognise identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them. (Stokes, 1994:5). Identities, places, and boundaries are constantly described, defined and challenged in this thesis—from the weekend *fiestas*, drag shows, ballet performances and Afro-Cuban religious ceremonies, to the bolero cassettes in Aurelio’s kitchen.

In 2006 Fidel Castro transferred his responsibilities to his brother Raúl, and never came back to power. The new President of Cuba is nicknamed by Cuban gays “*la china*” (“the Chinese woman”), referring humorously to his slanted eyes and echoing the rumours of his homosexual tendencies. He was once the dreaded leader of the notorious *Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción* (UMAP)⁷ labour camps, detaining homosexuals as well as other “social deviants”.⁸ Still (and as part of the “Cuban gay paradox”), it was under Raúl’s rule that a campaign against homophobia and in favour of sexual diversity was launched, led by his daughter, Dr Mariela Castro-Espín, head of

⁷ Military units to aid production, operating between 1965-1968

⁸ As seen in the award-winning film “Before Night Falls”, based on the autobiography of gay Cuban author Reinaldo Arenas. (Directed by Julian Schanbel, 2000).

Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual (CENESEX).⁹

In 2007, a few months after Fidel Castro stepped down from power, I concluded my fieldwork in Havana. Since then, I have continued pursuing the interesting developments, discussing my fieldwork with Cuban scholars, musicians, queer theorists and gay activists, and writing this thesis. Coincidentally, or perhaps not, my fieldwork period started and ended in two landmark years in Cuban gay history. The year I began my fieldwork, 1995, was the first time a rainbow flag was officially seen in a rally in Cuba; the next time this happened was only in 2008, a few months after I concluded my fieldwork, in a state-organised rally against homophobia. So, in a way, the thesis covers the period between one rainbow flag march to another, a period during which music consumed clandestinely took the place of the rainbow flag to define, declare, and celebrate gay identity in Cuba.

The following pages are a result of twelve years of visiting, participating in, and observing an underground scene full of emotions, turbulence, paradoxes and conflicts, a world full of light which survives and thrives “in the dark”, metaphorically and literally. During my fieldwork, I have experienced dozens of blackouts due to power-cuts (a frequent occurrence in the mid-1990s in Havana), sometimes oddly enough only in the “gay” area, the corner of Malecón and Avenida 23.¹⁰

Clifford Geertz wrote: “Understanding a people’s culture exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity.”(1973:14) This paradigm has been one of my guidelines and a great source of satisfaction in this research. Many a reader of drafts and of related articles which I published, who had previously visited Cuba and returned baffled by the confusing experience, said to me: “Now I understand”. This is especially true when it comes to “deviant” behavioural patterns and social conventions that I describe and analyse in relation to *jineterismo* (an indigenous form of sex-work/hustling),

⁹ The National Centre of Sexual Education.

¹⁰ Many of my gay informants claimed these were initiated by the authorities, especially in times when there are visiting dignitaries staying at the nearby Hotel Nacional, “like when the Pope was visiting [1998], the lights were off most of the time. He [Fidel] doesn’t want his guests to see *locas* [“crazy women”, a Hispanic gay discourse term for “screaming queens”] in the streets when he takes them for a night ride along the Malecón.” (Yulieski, 23, PersCom 2000).

tourist/local relations, transvestism, and even *santería* religious practice. “Exposing the normalness without reducing the particularity” is also what I attempt to do when uncovering appropriated musical “emotional spaces”, such as the queer interpretations of heterosexist genres, from bolero to salsa, *timba*, and *reggaetón*.

In the section discussing ethics in the field I admit to being emotionally involved and subjective at times. This is true not only when it concerns individuals, but also in the way I feel towards the *ambiente* in general. Still, I am not trying to “beautify” or “varnish” it, but to expose it as it is, and analyse the role that music plays in it.

In an article I wrote for “Attitude” magazine in 2007 about the gay scene in Havana, I quoted a thirty-year-old gay *habanero*, who told me: “We have a saying here: ‘In Cuba always try to enjoy yourself, never try to understand.’” This is the way most “outsiders” experience Havana’s *ambiente*. My mission, however, was to “understand”...

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*

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Finally, *muchas gracias* to my informants, dozens of gay *habaneros*, for hours and hours of fascinating conversations, many laughs (and cries at times), for genuinely “opening their hearts”, sometimes while taking risks, and for helping me understand...

The Cuban paradox: repression and tolerance

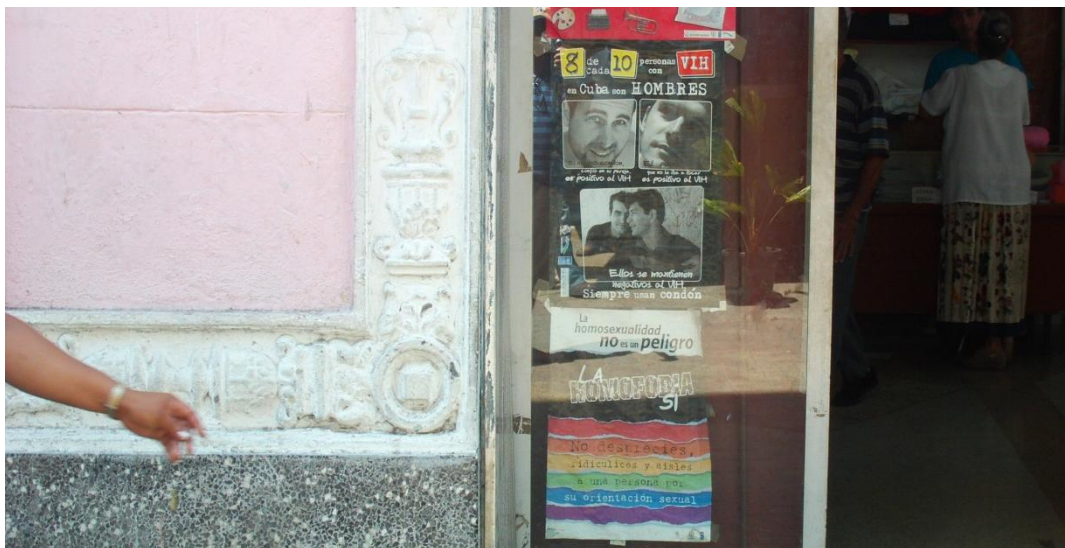
Photo 0.1 Police harassment

Two young gays stopped by a policeman outside the Hotel Inglaterra after they had coffee with gay tourists. He is asking them for their IDs . (Photo: Moshe Morad, 2007)



Photo 0.2 tolerance

Pro-gay posters in a Central Havana store saying: “Homosexuality is not dangerous, Homophobia IS!”. This was part of a state organised anti-homophobia campaign. (Photo: Moshe Morad, 2010)



Chapter 1

Introduction

Music creates an embodied but imaginary space that mediates our feelings, our dreams, and our desires--our internal space--with the social, the external space. In this way music gives each of us a sense of place, sometimes in connection with coherent spaces, sometimes in their place (Berland 1998:131).

As the title of this thesis indicates, this study is not about music *per se*, but rather about music *as*: music *as* space and as a social glue, as an anchor and as an agent for framing a “gay identity” in an unstable environment. This work features a variety of musical genres which are not necessarily produced by the subject group or even aimed at them, and certainly not exclusive to them, but rather are appropriated by them in a socio-psychological process. What is investigated here is not the music itself, but the music’s role as a mediator and unifying factor, and the construction of expressive space via music.

The following pages explore the physical, emotional and conceptual spaces that music has provided for gay men in Havana since the start of what is widely referred to as “*período especial en tiempo de paz*” (“special period in time of peace,” hereafter “Special Period”), an extended open-ended period of economic crisis and radical social and cultural changes which began in the early 1990s with the loss of financial support due to the fall of the USSR.¹¹ In 1991, the Cuban government announced “war-time” austerity measures to combat the economic crisis, such as a new rationing schedule, a severe cut of fuel supplies, closure of some industrial plants and factories, and the reduction of working hours in many spheres of production. To add insult to injury, the United States

¹¹ In her 2005 article “Cuba: is the ‘special period’ really over?” economy researcher Cynthia Benzing writes: “The ‘special period’ has not ended and will only get worse if Cuba does not meet its economic challenges with long-term structural reforms. Fidel Castro himself admitted in 2007 in his “Reflexiones” column in the newspaper *Granma* that the Special Period was not over yet, but that it has “eased up”. The financial crisis and “Special Period”-style measures to tackle it continued well into 2010, with the 2009 global economic crisis adding insult to injury, or, as some say, an excuse, and further “privatisation” measures were announced in 2010.

extended the *bloqueo* (blockade), and in 1992 introduced new economic sanctions against Cuba. Alongside despair and disorientation, the Special Period brought about a certain relaxation of regulations applied across the island, easing the former tight control of the government over people's daily lives, allowing farmers to sell their goods in the markets, and enabling individuals to open *paladares* (private restaurants) and to rent out rooms in their homes to tourists (*casa particular*). There was also a change of policy regarding tourism, which had previously been discouraged, and, from the early 1990s on was deemed by Castro a "necessary evil", and encouraged as an essential source of income (Perna 2005a:192–238).¹²

Although defined by the government in pure economic terms, the Special Period was social and cultural, as well as economic, and brought a deep cultural change and a wave of creativity. Hernandez-Reguant compares it to the cold war and the 1960s, periods which were not only a historical convention but became "defining category[ies] of experience" (2009:1). Psychologically for the people of Cuba, the 1990s did not only mean deprivation and hopelessness, the constant need to wheel-and-deal and improvise solutions, but also a constant state of escapism, living in a dream of escaping Cuba and living elsewhere, and ... waiting. "The experience was intense, yet the period was constructed as a time of waiting; as an irresolute transition." (ibid.:2).

Poverty and despair on the one hand, and the ease of regulations and rapid exposure to tourism, capitalism, and consumerism on the other, quickly led many young *habaneros*¹³ to a way of life ruled by the street-savvy concepts of *luchar* (to fight for survival), *resolver* (to resolve, to find ways around a problem), and *jinetear* (to hustle and prostitute). In contradiction to the Socialist ideology, money became a major player in the Special Period discourse, with more than fifteen expressions used for money,¹⁴ and many songs dedicated to it.¹⁵

¹² By following the references to tourism in Fidel Castro's speeches during the 1990s, one notes a gradual softening of tone, but always very cautious and reserved. He also keeps referring, in his own rather enigmatic way to "healthy tourism", a remark to which some of my informants replied: "When he says healthy, he means heterosexual".

¹⁴ *Moneda*, CUC (pronounced "cook"), *baro*, *chavito*, *divisa*, *fula*, *dolar*, *peso*, *plata*, *melon*, *moni*, *guanikiki*, *lana*, *pasta*, *yira*. Source: <http://www.havana-guide.com/learn-spanish.html> (accessed 29.5.2010).

¹⁵ For example: "No Money" (partially in English), by Cuban music collective Interactivo. Audio: App. III/1

From a social point of view, the Special Period signaled a conceptual change in values, and perception--a revolution within a revolution, triggered by the economic crisis and fuelled by postmodernism and globalisation. From its onset in 1990, this upheaval started changing Cuba's socio-cultural fabric, and triggered, together with a new permanent state of frustration and complaint ("*no es fácil*": It's not easy, becoming the mantra and the almost automatic polite response of every Cuban to the question about life in Cuba throughout the 1990s), a state of perpetual change, questioning and instability that continues to this date. Furthermore, it led the island's social and cultural life into a new phase, creating substantial cracks in the old revolutionary social order and ideology, allowing the weaker and marginalised segments of society to express themselves and propel themselves forward.

Whereas in 1965 Fidel Castro claimed that homosexuals cannot be considered "true Revolutionary" and "should not be allowed in positions where they are able to exert influence upon young people." (Castro, in Lockwood 1990[1967]:124); in 1992 he said he opposes "any form of repression, contempt, scorn, or discrimination with regard to homosexuals." (Castro in Borge 1992:139–141). The rhetoric on homosexuality being "anti-revolutionary" which led to the state repression against homosexuals in the first 30 years of the Revolution has indeed diminished in the 1990s, but police harassment remained stronger than ever. In 2001 the BBC reported on "a new campaign against gays in Cuba" that included raids, closing down of meeting places, and preventing gays from gathering and meeting in the streets,¹⁶ and three years later, in 2004, it reported that "Cuban police have once again launched a campaign against homosexuals, specifically directed at transvestites".¹⁷

In this atmosphere of uncertainty and instability, under constant police harassment, and the ever-changing attitude towards homosexuality and conflicting messages from "up above" (oscillating between homophobia and tolerance), a thriving yet officially unrecognised, gay scene has developed, known in the gay street-parlance as *el ambiente* (see footnote 3). During my initial introduction to the *ambiente*, I discovered the strong

¹⁶ Source: BBC Mundo, http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/misc/newsid_1185000/1185641.stm (accessed 3.12.2007)

¹⁷Source: BBC Mundo, http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latin_america/newsid_3926000/3926441.stm (accessed 3.12.2007)

presence of music—from the weekend’s clandestine *fiestas*, through the ballet and bolero, to gay *santería* gatherings, and decided to investigate its special role in it. Did music provide the “glue” which held this scene together during the Special Period despite the regime’s attempts to either eliminate or assimilate it?

The thesis looks into Havana’s *ambiente* during the Special Period and investigates the role of musical spaces in maintaining it, enabling and facilitating self expression, the consolidation of group identity, interaction and escapism. This study is based on an extended period of fieldwork carried out during eight different visits between 1995 and 2007, thus allowing me to monitor and analyse the changes and evolution of the *ambiente* throughout the research period.

This study is exploratory in nature and therefore an evolving “grounded theory” approach has been used as a methodological tool (explained in Chapter 3). Fieldwork commenced with a “hanging out” and observation period, from which an initial hypothesis arose: certain music genres and scenes have an important role in maintaining and nourishing the *ambiente*. This hypothesis was tested during the extended research period, during which new musical genres emerged, and new “musical scenes” were discovered. Findings were tested, challenged, and examined in different stages of the research period.

From the findings, observations, and numerous interviews, informal conversations and small survey questionnaires, I identified five main musical scenes which confirmed my initial hypothesis. I extracted common themes which explain why and how these scenes provided “space” for the consolidation of gay identity in Special Period Havana, a space which allowed the crystallisation and expression of a social identity and provided means for interaction and for escapism, the socio-psychological pillars of Havana’s gay scene in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Most of the subjects of this investigation did not directly experience pre-revolution Cuba and the first formative years of the revolutionary experience, nor did they experience the “dark ages” of Cuban repression and homophobia during the 1960s and 1970s. Still, they grew into a society influenced and traumatised by those periods, in a time of chaos, confusion, and instability, shadowed by the uncertainty and incoherence regarding the future of Cuba in the post-Castro era. Twenty-two-year-old Yulieski, one of

my main informants, whom I first met in 1995 and since has become a regular and reliable source of information says: “We, the Special Period generation, have a new way of thinking, feeling, and reacting, very different from that of the revolution’s generation. Our way of life and values are different. Our *lucha* [struggle] is different, and so is the way we express ourselves” (PersCom1999).

These changes set the ground for the formation of a new “gay identity” that differs from the pre-Special Period homosexual scene in Cuba, and which is strongly influenced by the exposure to *extranjeros* (foreigners, a Cuban street discourse term for tourists), and by the social changes. Not only racial (Perna 2005a:3), but also queer, elements have emerged from the cracks in the Revolution’s wall during the Special Period, challenging and destabilising Cuban *machismo* and traditional hetero-normativity. The changes nurtured among the Cuban public a growing acceptance of diversity, individualism, and pluralism, in contradiction to the “unison” ideology and philosophy of pre-Special Period Cuban communism, thereby facilitating the emergence and growth of a visible gay *ambiente*. The recognition of *diversidad*, diversity, has become a major concept in Special Period Havana and the main motif of the pro-gay and anti-homophobia campaigns since 2008. This recognition is embedded in the Special Period concept of pluralism. In an interesting 1998 essay titled “Mulitcubanidad,” Hernandez-Reguant shows how the 1990s brought forward different kinds of “Cuban identity,” including Diasporic-Cubanidad and Afro-Cubanidad. Singer Pedro Luís Ferrer has put it this way: “There is not just one way of being Cuban, rather many and infinite ways”(2005).¹⁸

Music plays an important role in Cuban history, in the country’s collective psyche, in its way of thinking, and in its traumas, changes and transitions. It is a strong signifier of Cuban identity as inherited, adopted or projected: “music and dance are crucial to definitions of the nation and serve as highly visible “primordial” referents that define Cubans against others” (Moore 1997:5). Music is both a key symbol and signifier of *Cubanidad* ("Cuban-ness") in the eyes of the foreign viewer, and one of Cuba's main unifying and identity-forming resources internally. It is the country’s main cultural ingredient, the blood that runs in Cuban society’s veins, vitalising, revitalising, and

¹⁸ Interviewed by Navarro (2005).

energising it. Furthermore, music provides many “solutions” in Cuba – from financial gain for the musicians and for those trading in it, directly or indirectly, as in the case of *jineterismo* (Chapter 5), to communication with the *orishas*, the Afro-Cuban religion dieties (Chapter 9). It also provides, as will be demonstrated in this thesis, spaces of identity, expression, and cultural survival for the country’s minorities.

The Special Period had a strong effect upon Cuban music, and has in turn been deeply affected by it. New “aggressive” musical genres such as *timba*, Cuban hip-hop, and later *reggaetón*¹⁹ evolved, while lyrics have become more critical and daring. Perna calls *timba*, the musical genre that was born during the first years of the Special Period, “the sound of the crisis,” and claims that it has “brought to the fore previously marginalised aspects of Afro-Cuban culture” (2005a:3). So did Cuban hip-hop and later *reggaetón*, the other two genres that became a major part of the Special Period’s musicscape.

While most researchers of music in Cuba during the Special Period²⁰ focus on marginal groups relating to race and, to a lesser extent, gender, in this thesis I look at a marginalised group based on sexuality.

The evolution of subcultures in complex urban environments has been thoroughly researched and theorised about. Everett Hughes claims that “[w]herever some group of people have a bit of common life with a modicum of isolation from other people, a common corner in society, common problems and perhaps a couple of common enemies, there culture grows” (Hughes 1961:28 quoted in Hannerz 1980:287). Thus, in spite of the regime’s obsession with nurturing a consolidated common Cuban culture, and discouraging minority grouping, with a particular bias against “gay” grouping, political or cultural²¹, a “word of mouth” gay subculture did evolve in 1990s Havana.

¹⁹ There are a few ways to spell this genre’s name. The most common one outside of Cuba is *reggaeton*, Jan Fairley uses *regeton* (2006). The the one most commonly used in the Cuban press, such as *Juventud Rebelde* (the newspaper of Cuban youth), which dedicated many articles to the genre, is *reguetón* the spelling closer to the Cuban street-discourse pronunciation. I decided to use the spelling *reggaetón*, as used by Baker (2011)

²⁰ Such as Perna 2001,2005a, 2005b; Fairley 2004,2006,2009; Baker 200,2006,2009; Fernandes 2006; Rivera, Marshall and Pacini Hernandez 2009.

²¹ According to Dr. Abel Sierra Madero, Dr. Mariela Castro-Espín, the head of CENESEX, who leads the gay rights agenda in the country strongly opposes the idea of a “gay rights group” in Cuba and advocates acceptance and integration in the general society rather than differentiation and organisation . Sierra-Madero claims that this is due to the Cuban authorities’ paranoia from any political and social grouping. (PersCom 2006).

Gays in Special Period Havana, are “trapped” in a liminal space dominated by two unstable “transitory” dimensions - on the one hand homosexuality itself, which in the Cuban context presents a problematic, multiple, and changeable identity,²²; and on the other – the Special Period, an unstable transition period in Cuban history. This research is therefore anchored within a framework of dual instability and liminality, which, as I found out, not only characterises the subject group, but also the music that the group has chosen to appropriate.

As Turner writes:

Liminality, marginality, and structural inferiority are conditions in which are frequently generated myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, and works of art. These cultural forms provide men with a set of templates or models, which are, at one level, periodic reclassifications of reality and man’s relationship to society, nature, and culture. But they are more than classifications, since they incite men to action as well as to thought. (2008[1969]:128,129)

This work will show how “action” incited by liminality, marginality, and structural inferiority is related to music by using music to create spaces of identity and anchors of relative stability, from clandestine parties to religious ceremonies. The concept of “ritual” will also be investigated here, both in its primary religious context and metaphorically.

The association of popular music with socially marginalised groups is a universal phenomenon. As Peter Manuel observes,

One of the most remarkable features of the evolution of popular music is its association, innumerable cultures worldwide, with an unassimilated, socially marginalized class ... It is paradoxical that these marginal misfits in their milieu of bars and brothels should be so crucial in the development of new musical forms, especially since the genres they created are often destined later to become celebrated as national expressions. (Manuel 1990:18)

In *Nationalizing Blackness* (1997), Robin Moore looks at Afro-Cubans as the prototype of the artificially (or maybe not) created *Cubanidad*, and as the source of Cuban popular music, nowadays “celebrated as a national expression”. I argue that another marginalised group, gays, has also a role in the development of musical genres and meanings, perhaps not via creating new musical genres, but by appropriating them and giving them a queer dimension such as in the case of bolero, ballet, and even African-Diasporic religious music. "Making music isn't a way of expressing ideas; it is a

²² See on Havana’s “homoscape” in Chapter 5.

way of living them", claims Simon Frith (1998:111), and so is consuming music. The creation and consumption of music in Cuba have always reflected the country's social issues of race, class, and gender identity, and furthermore, reflected *cubanidad* ("Cubanity") itself, as Moore noted (1997:4) "the study of music provides information on the construction of Cuban identity, past and present."

In the context of this thesis, music is mainly analysed from a functionalist perspective. Its main function is, as Baily puts it, "to give people a sense of identity, and so to promote the successful continuation of the groups concerned" (Baily 1994:47, based on Merriam 1964:226-227), and, in light of the special circumstances in Special Period Havana, to help maintain this identity in a society which discourages its consolidation and promotes non-secterism. As Frith puts it, "What music can do is put into play a sense of identity that may or may not fit the way we are placed by other social facts" (Frith 1987:149). The function of music as "commodity" is also investigated here, but rather than a "commodity" in the music industry sense, the focus is on "commodity" in a human exchange and interaction context. Paradoxically, as will be shown, in an "anti-capitalist" country, at least officially, with hardly any free commercial music industry, music and musicality are not only a "commodity," but an interface for interaction and a "key" to a locked door, in more ways than one.

Most works about music deal with music-making; this study, however, deals strictly with music consumption. Valentine makes a distinction between three different processes of listening to, and consuming, music: consumption of music in public venues, "intentional, all the senses are engaged, not just hearing"; music as a backdrop to everyday activities, the soundscape, not deliberate, but "heard or overheard...in public spaces"; and lastly, consciously listening to music in private spaces, "using music as a vehicle to transport the listener to an imaginary or fantasy world" (1995:475). These three modes are relevant to both live and recorded music consumption. In the context of this thesis, I mostly look at the first and third modes: intentional/all senses engaged (thus fulfilling the role of forming and maintaining *identity*, and of "transporting to a fantasy world" (*escapism*). *Identity* and *escapism* are two of the three primary themes mentioned in the thesis's title. The third is *interaction*, and this is related to another important way of consuming and using music, not mentioned by Valentine - communication. Music is

made and “consumed” as communication in many cultures, especially in the African continent²³ which, as is well known, is one of the main roots of Cuban music. Throughout this thesis it will be shown how music is used in order to communicate, among Cuban gays, between gay Cubans and tourists, and even between humans and deities in *santería* religious practice.

This work uses a “landscape” approach. It looks at an “ethnoscape” rather than ethnicity²⁴, and at a “musicscape” rather than one specific musical genre or form. These terms, as well as other issues of approach and conceptualisation will be explained and discussed in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. The “ethnoscape” consists of gay men in Havana, including locals, out-of-town migrants, and tourists. The “musicscape”, consists of different musical genres and events which are grouped into three categories: 1. the gay *fiestas* and the dance music featured in them, primarily house music, salsa, *timba* and *reggaetón*; 2. bolero music (mostly consumed at home); and, 3. “performance” musical spaces including drag shows, ballet performances, and *santería* ceremonies.

*

Since the early 1990s, the place and role of music in gay communities has been investigated by music and gay/queer studies scholars, but mostly from a U.S./Eurocentric perspective.²⁵ The relationship between music and gays in Cuba has, surprisingly, only received brief and passing mentions in the existing literature, as will be shown in the literature review (Chapter 2).

²³ One of the pioneering works about the way drums in Africa are used as a mean of communication is John F. Carrington’s “Talking Drums of Africa” (1949)

²⁴ “Gay as ethnicity” was a concept established by Dennis Altman (1983) and embraced by many following gay and queer studies scholars especially in a US and Eurocentric context. It furthermore achieved, according to Altman widespread acceptance, by both straight and gays in the USA, with a “notion that gay men and lesbians constituted a sort of ethnic group, roughly analogous to Jewish Americans or Italian Americans” (Epstein 1999:43). Epstein describes the gay community in the United States as a “quasi-ethnic” community (ibid.) working along the lines of other ethnic groups (with a political and social agenda, cultural identity, economics, media and interst-groups, and even a “language” and a flag), and “jockeying . . . for their ‘piece of the pie’”.

²⁵ I deliberated using the term “Western” or “Eurocentric” throughout this thesis, and due to the obvious problematics of the former (to start with, Cuba is geographically and in many cases culturally “western”), I decided on the latter, based on its definition in the Merriam-Webster dictionary: “reflecting a tendency to interpret the world in terms of western and especially European or Anglo-American values and experiences”. This definition is still problematic in the case of Cuba which has a strong US/European cultural influence, but is the best one I could find to differentiate between the “West” (U.S., Europe and Anglo-American cultures such as Australia) and Cuba.

This work intends to fill the above mentioned gap.²⁶ I hope and believe that this research will contribute not only to a greater knowledge of gay culture in Cuba, but also enjoy a wider application in a cross-cultural context. Understanding the role of music in providing a space for identity-formation to a marginalised group during a social process of transition and change that on the one hand fosters hope and optimism, and on the other, fear and instability – can contribute to deciphering similar processes in other societies undergoing transition.

As for the disciplinary contribution, research on gay and queer behaviour within the discipline of ethnomusicology is still in its early stages.²⁷ Gay musicology is a relatively new concept/discipline (Brett and Wood 1994). “Gay *ethnomusicology*” is even more scarce, and not much work has been dedicated to the connection of homosexuality to music in non-Western cultures, in spite of the fact that across many different cultures musicians have been associated with “gender-bending” and homosexuality, as Philip Brett has put it: “All musicians ... are faggots in the parlance of the male locker room” (2006:17, 18). Ned Sublette notes that in Islamic Cádiz, the first musicians called *mukhannatūn* were “effeminate freed-men known for their association with male prostitution” (Sublette 2004:14), and that the Islamic philosopher Ibn Abi al-Dunyā (AD 823–94) condemned music “as being in a class with such vices as chess, wine-drinking, love poetry, *qiyān* [singing girls], and homosexuality” (ibid.). However, unlike most recent publications and researches in this area, which look at the connection between *musicality* and sexuality (Brett and Wood 1992, 1994, 2002; Susan McClary 2002 [1991]), rather than investigate musicality and music-making, the present thesis delves into the role of music itself and the way it affects its gay audience, and deals with the homosexuality of the music consumers, and not of the music makers.

In 2008, in a panel commemorating the twenty-first anniversary of Ellen Koskoff’s book *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (1987)--perhaps the first

²⁶ Prof. Helen Myers, editor of *Ethnomusicology*, commented: “This is an exciting topic” (email correspondence, 2008), and Prof. Peter Manuel, one of the leading authorities on Cuban music has written to me: “Interesting topic. I can’t think of anyone in particular who has worked on anything like that” (email correspondence, 2005).

²⁷ Surprisingly enough, the first ever PhD field research on homosexual behaviour (a study of Mexican male homosexuality by anthropologist Joseph Carrier), commenced only in 1968 and completed in 1972, only twenty-three years before I started my research.

publication dealing with gender and sexuality from an ethnomusicological perspective-- Deborah Wong, president of the Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM), said: "Serious ethnomusicological work on music and sexuality remains scattered. If attention to gender has gone from unusual to expected, sustained work by ethnomusicologists on sexuality and music is still unusual" (SEM newsletter 2008:1).²⁸ To conclude that commemorative meeting, Koskoff's visionary message to future ethnomusicologists was,

I do believe that we have come of age since my book was first published, in the sense that we have gone through a period of healthy growth, exploration, and the formation of basic ideas about gender, sexuality and music. But now we must come of age in a different way: we must become independent and begin to develop new theoretical paradigms for examining gender, sexuality, and music that allow for more fluidity (no pun intended). We need new models that allow for change, flexibility, interaction, negotiation – all those things we normally talk about in music making but often forget when talking about gender, where most things seem to reduce to binary contrast. That's what I'm hoping the next generation can do. (ibid.)

I humbly and enthusiastically accept this challenge, and hope my work will make a modest contribution towards this evolution. In the pages that follow, I aim to introduce some "new models that allow for change, flexibility, interaction, negotiation" that Koskoff appeals for, and an alternative to the "reduction to binary contrast."

²⁸ I will add to this that even among the rare and scattered ethnomusicological research dealing with sexuality, the majority of work published is by women, focusing on feminist and lesbian issues. Male homosexuality in different cultures has hardly been researched from an ethnomusicological perspective and, if at all, then only as a passing reference. Even in this important SEM meeting/conversation all the ethnomusicologists participating, indeed the top scholars in the field of ethnomusicology, gender and sexuality, were women: Professor of Ellen Koskoff, Eileen M. Hayes, Amy Corin, and Roberta Lamb.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The cross-disciplinary nature of this thesis lies in the juxtaposition of three topics, each of which received considerable attention in the academic world, generating a substantial body of literature that covered a range of themes, such as homosexuality/gay identity/queer theory; music in relation to identity and social change; and Cuba during the Special Period. However, as already mentioned in the introduction, the literature existing on the specific area of this research is either non-existent or grossly inadequate. Although combinations of any two of these three topics (Cuban music, homosexuality in Cuba and in Latin America, and gay/queer music) have been gaining attention, especially since the early 1990s, resulting in some interesting publications—nothing dedicated to the area of overlap of the three fields has been published yet.

This review will concentrate on post-1990 publications. Due to the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary nature of the topic and the related literature, for each book reviewed the author's main disciplinary field will appear in square brackets after the author or editor's name.

The works I have chosen to feature here were signaled out for their relevance and quality, for their “pioneering” value, for being the “literature pillars” of this thesis, that is, sources I keep referring to in the different chapters. At the same time they demonstrate the absence of attention in works on Cuban social and music issues to the gay scene, and in books about homosexuality-to music.

Cuban Music

In recent years some in-depth books on Cuban music have been published by non-Cuban scholars and experts, some bring a wider historical perspective, while others focus on specific genres. One of the most comprehensive books about Cuban music, written by

a non-Cuban, is *Cuba and its Music: from the First Drums to the Mambo* (2004), by musician, record executive, and radio producer Ned Sublette. Sublette is a proud non-academic; however, his book features an unprecedentedly detailed history and analysis of Cuban music up until the *mambo* era in the early 1950s. The book is a “labour of love”, written in a fluid style and graced with an engrossing narrative. “Music is so essential to Cuban character” (2004:viii) claims Sublette, an assumption on which I base my theory: if music is essential to the Cuban character, then it must be essential to social processes evolving among segments of the society, in our case, gays. Sublette follows the interesting dynamics “of cultural collisions, of voluntary and forced migrations, of religions and revolutions” (ibid.) in Cuban history and culture, claiming that “revolution” in Cuban culture had started well before 1959. This approach demonstrates how the dynamics of culture and music may precede (and even foretell) the political dynamics, a sequence that can be seen in many different cultures. While Sublette touches on issues of gender in Cuban music, he does not explore it enough. As in most works on Cuban music, he focuses on race and its influence on the texture of Cuban society, culture and music, but neglects gender and sexuality. Homosexuality is only mentioned in the context of the homosexual *bolero* Bola de Nieve (2004:387–391).²⁹ Another obvious shortcoming of this book, in the context of the present thesis, is that the period it covers ends in 1952.

Music & Revolution: Cultural Change in Socialist Cuba (2006), by Robin D. Moore [ethnomusicology] introduces the important artists and musical genres that have emerged in Cuba since 1959 and links them to the island’s political and social changes. The strong symbiotic connection between politics, social changes and music in Cuba is the pivotal point of Moore’s book, in which *nueva trova*, *música bailable* (dance music), Afro-Cuban folklore, and sacred *santería* music are examined as part of a sociocultural process. As for the timeframe of the book and the way it spans the Special Period, the 1990s, the financial and ideological crisis, and the exposure to tourism and capitalism, are each thoroughly covered, while the post-2000 period is attended to only briefly and in a reflective, rather than ethnographic, way, in the concluding chapter (2006:251–263).

²⁹ See Chapter 8

I was encouraged by Moore's book, which was published just as I finished my fieldwork in Havana and started writing up my thesis. It inspired me to find a similar socio-musical approach and a similar emphasis on "change". I have drawn heavily on Moore's work and the connections he identified between musical genres and social processes, as a means of establishing further connections between musical genres and environments and the social processes taking place in Havana's gay community.

Here again, homosexuality is only mentioned in brief, or as an anecdote. When discussing trends in Cuban popular music lyrics during the Special Period, Moore merely observes that "gender relations are another topic that has surfaced, in reference to both male-female relations and homosexuality" (2006:241). However, he provides no examples for this claim, and, as I will show later, the reference in lyrics to male homosexuality is very scarce. In fact in other Special Period art forms, such as theatre and literature, homosexuality received more direct discussion than it did in popular music. Furthermore, even in the genres Moore refers to, such as singer-songwriter *nueva trova* and rap, there are more lesbian-related songs than male-to-male gay.

Based on his 2001 PhD work, *Timba: The Sound of the Cuban Crisis* (2005) by Vincenzo Perna [ethnomusicology], has served as an important source in this work, primarily for its in-depth analysis of *timba*, one of the genres featured in this thesis (chapters 6 and 7); and secondarily, for his analysis of the Special Period and its social changes and the way these were reflected in music. Perna describes *timba*, the only thoroughbred Cuban musical genre to emerge during the early years of the Special Period, as "a largely black youth subculture that has grown up in the shadow of the crisis ... ultimately symbolising the difficult, contradictory opening of Cuba to the outside world" (2005:4). I discuss this theme in the context of another "subculture", Havana's gay scene. Perna's background and approach as both a journalist and an ethnomusicology scholar is similar to mine, and indeed I closely identify with his socio-musical approach, and with his rich and cogent ethnographic descriptions, interviews and quotes, as well as his constant search for social meanings in music. Another important and insightful source on *timba* and its race/sexuality/gender aspects is Hernandez-Reguant's essay, "Havana's Timba: A Macho Sound for Black Sex" (2006:249-278). Hernandez-Reguant [cultural anthropology] also edited a particularly relevant and inspiring multidisciplinary

collection of essays, *Cuba in the Special Period: Culture and Ideology in the 1990s* (2009), which brings a fresh reflexive approach to cultural changes during the period. Three chapters enlightened my experience in the field and reaffirmed my own impression and understanding of the social forces and interactions. Hernandez-Reguant's own "Muticubanidad" (pp.76-88) discusses multiple identities among Special Period Cubans. Kevin M. Delgado's chapter, "Spiritual Capital: Foreign Patronage and the Trafficking of Santería" (pp.51-68), and the only chapter in the collection dedicated entirely to music: "El Rap Cubano: Can't Stop! Won't Stop the Movement!" by Roberto Zurbano³⁰ (pp.143-158) tackle the connection between music, identity and social change, in Special Period Havana. This collection, in spite of presenting a wide cultural view, including aspects of gender and sexuality, fails, just like most of the work published on Cuban culture and music, to tackle the gay scene and its cultural aspects, and, once again, only mentions homosexuality in an anecdotal or incidental way as one example of the growing scope of identities in Special Period Havana and the increasing tolerance towards them.

In *Cuba Represent!: Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of New Revolutionary Cultures* (2006), Sujatha Fernandes [political science] looks at what she calls "artistic public spheres" and their relationship with the regime. Again, as per the works of Zurbano (2009) and Geoffrey Baker (2005, 2006, 2009), rap music is the main focus of the book. Fernandes brings to light the growing number of women rappers in Cuba, a phenomenon that has been destabilising traditional male domination in Cuban popular music, bringing to the surface feminist concerns, and even open lesbian texts and artists. In fact, the lesbian voice in Cuban rap is strong and loud, in a way that the gay voice is not heard in contemporary popular music. Cuban hip-hop is an important musical sphere in Special Period Cuba, and indeed among young Cuban lesbians, but has little application in the male gay *ambiente*. Many Cuban gays I spoke with see rap as sexist and homophobic, and because it is much less popular among young gays than among young heterosexuals in Cuba, it does not constitute a "space" for gays and therefore not featured in this thesis.

The most recent addition to the literature dedicated to popular Latin music genres is

³⁰ Translated by Kate Levitt.

Reggaeton (2009), a collection of articles about the latest dance music craze in the Latin world, edited by Raquel Z. Rivera [Puerto Rican Studies], Wayne Marshall [ethnomusicology], and Deborah Pacini Hernandez [anthropology]. In Cuba, a local version – *reggaetón a lo cubano* or *cubatón*, has become the most popular dance music genre since the turn of the millennium, and is the newest musical “space” in the gay *ambiente* (Chapters 6 and 7). This particular book, however, looks at the genre throughout the Latino world with emphasis on Puerto Rico and the United States, and only two of its chapters are devoted exclusively to Cuba (Baker 2009:165–199; Fairley 2009:280–296).³¹

Important classics on Cuban music by “native” researchers, which contemporary scholars regularly refer to and rely on, include Fernando Ortiz (1906, 1947, 1950, 1952, 1952–5); Grenet (1939); and Carpentier (1946); and contemporary Cuban musicologists Ayala (1981); Orovio (1981/1992); Acosta (1983, 2002); and Padure Fuentes (1997). Edited by Peter Manuel [ethnomusicology], *Essays on Cuban Music* (1991) features seminal essays by Cuban scholars, which served as important sources regarding the popular music industry in post-Revolutionary Cuba and the way it was affected by social changes. For example, “The problem of music and its dissemination in Cuba” by Leonardo Acosta, which deals with the dynamics of music in light of the financial crisis, in its very early stages; and Manuel’s concluding chapter, “Musical Pluralism in Revolutionary Cuba,” which provides a helpful overview of music consumption in Cuba and of the regime’s attitude towards music.

As for *santería* religion and its music from the growing literature on the subject, these books served as valuable sources: *The Music of Santería: Traditional Rhythms of the Batá Drums*, by Steven Cornelius [ethnomusicology] and John Amira [master drummer] (1992) was one of my main sources to understand the music of *santería* as well as a main source of *batá toques* transcriptions, and will be therefore quoted and referred to in Chapter 9.

³¹ Other important sources about specific genres and movements in Cuban music and their connection to social changes are Rumba: *Dance and Social Change in Contemporary Cuba* (1995) by Yvonne Daniel [dance studies and Afro-American studies]; *Nationalizing Blackness: Afrocubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana 1920–1940* (1997) by Robin Moore [ethnomusicology]; and *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures* (1998) by Frances R. Aparicio [Spanish and American culture studies].

Divine Utterances: The Performance of Afro-Cuban Santería (2001) by Katherine Hagedorn [ethnomusicology] provided further insight into the performance of *santería*, focusing on the conflict, or duality, between the sacred and the secular. Hagedorn's particular attention to the performance aspects and the dramatisation of both the actual rituals and their folkloric forms, reaffirmed my decision to, likewise, focus in Chapter 9 on the performance aspects of the religion, without fear of being accused of blasphemy or reductionism. She examines the phenomenon from a social perspective and claims that the political and social changes, including tourism, one of the central themes discussed in this thesis, have contributed to the blurring of boundaries between sacred and secular/folkloric. My description and analysis of trance and spirit possession (Chapter 9), a practice in which gays play an important role, follow her notion that it is triggered by psychology and music. Just like Hagedorn, and inspired by her, this thesis constantly identifies paradoxes in social and cultural processes in Special Period Havana, however, from a different perspective and focus.

The main musical feature of *santería* is the sacred *batá* drumming. The most recent publication on the subject which includes insights about the "male-only" taboo associated with the *batá* from the Yoruba Nigerian perspective, which, I claim, differs from the Cuban perspective in spite of being its origin, is *Ancient Text Messages of the Yoruba Bata Drum: Cracking the Code* (2010) by Amanda Villepastour (Vincent). Both the book and her PhD thesis, on which the book is based, served as sources in Chapter 9, showing the similar and the different between African Yoruba music philosophy and Yoruba-originated Afro-Cuban one.

Cuban Homosexuality

Homosexuality in contemporary Cuba has been the subject of several books and PhD theses, mainly penned from political and social science viewpoints, starting in 1981 with *Gays Under the Cuban Revolution*, a very political report by the disillusioned left wing activist and journalist Allen Young [journalistic/political], strongly denouncing revolutionary homophobia in its early years.

The main post-1990 source on homosexuality in Cuba is Ian Lumsden's *Machos, Maricones and Gays: Homosexuality in Cuba* (1996). Lumsden [social sciences] does not

hesitate to criticise the homophobic doctrines and actions of the regime, but at the same time he mentions the rapid increase in tolerance, and tries to help us understand the broader context of certain seemingly homophobic acts, avoiding the knee-jerk accusation of homophobia that plagues many North American critiques. He expresses his experience of what I refer to as the “Cuban Paradox,” the backbone of this research.

Lumsden maps the social scene of gays in Havana in the early 1990s, and is the first writer to bring alive the unique “feel” of the *ambiente*, and how it combines homoeroticism, vitality and “good time” with fear, repression and police harassment. His description and analysis of the variation of ideas and ideals among the different generations of Cuban gays provides an important basis for an understanding of the changes that took place during the Special Period. However, Lumsden’s report ends in the mid-1990s, the point where my research starts, and when Cuban society and the *ambiente* begin to enter a new era, in which the Special Period morphs from a temporary status to a permanent way of life, and the gay scene in Cuba moves into the most significant period in the history of its evolution. The second area in which I take up where Lumsden’s book left off is music. Lumsden is a political science scholar, and the book has a clear social approach, based on Lumsden’s personal experience in a certain period in the beginning of the 1990s. Unfortunately, he mentions music only briefly, describing the *fiestas de diez pesos*. For many of the Cuban gays I spoke with, music and dance were the most direct and “close to home” aspect of their lifestyle, sense of community, and social interaction, a revelation that led me to embark on this twelve-year research.

In *Gay Cuban Nation* (2001), Emilio Bejel [literature] focuses on the way nationalism and homosexuality are presented in Cuban literature and film. This work only emphasises the need for a systematic historical investigation of music, homosexuality, and nation-building in Cuba. I touch upon this in the present thesis, while focusing on the Special Period. Bejel highlights the revolutionary condemnation of the “urban” way of life, seeing homosexuality as an “urban” illness, while glorifying the “rural” Cuban man--the *guajiro*, explaining the background to the status of Havana as the reputed “capital of sin,” and cradle of the “queer Diaspora” of Cuban gays, thus setting the ground for my research of the *ambiente*.

One of the books that influenced me most, not so much for its empirical data as for its innovative analytical approach and style, is *Tropic of Desire – Interventions from Queer Latino America* (2000) by José Quiroga [queer studies], which delves into cultural aspects of Latin-American homosexuality from a queer perspective, and itself employs a queer narrative. He finds “queerness” embedded in Latin American culture, psyche, and *modus operandi* “to a degree that was perhaps unthought of in the United States” (2000:19), an observation that inspired me to discover and expose queer elements and appropriations in Cuban musical genres and environments. When it comes to style, Quiroga talks about the “queer organisation” of his book. Through chapters dealing with discourse and sub-cultural phenomena, he manages to portray and explain Latin-American homosexuality in a far deeper and more sensitive way than many books that are more “traditional” in their approach. Quiroga questions concepts of gay identity, the “closet”, homophobia, homosociality, and so forth, and is cautious and critical about definitions set by previous researchers trying to explain Latin sexuality. I agree with Quiroga regarding the danger in using typically Eurocentric concepts to understand homosexuality in Latin America, and implement a similar caution in my analysis. Quiroga also emphasises the role of coded and decoded information within the circuit of Latino-American homosexualities (2000:18). Indeed, this was a major challenge in my fieldwork, where I needed to decipher codes on a regular basis. Like Bejel, Quiroga concentrates mainly on analysing literary texts and processes. Moreover, he dedicates a chapter to cinema³² and two chapters to music, including one on bolero.

Del otro lado del espejo – la sexualidad en la construcción de la nación cubana (From the other side of the mirror – sexuality in the construction of the Cuban nation), by Abel Sierra Madero [anthropology] (2006) is the only book published as yet by a Cuban researcher. This book, in spite of its controversial subject, won the Premio Casa de la Américas award in Cuba, and was published in Spain. However, the author claims that because of its controversial subject was also made unavailable in Cuba (PersCom 2009). It provides a unique and unprecedented look “from within” into the history of Cuban homosexuality, homoeroticism, homophobia, transgender, and perceptions of masculinity

³² The film “Strawberry and Chocolate”. See Chapter 5.

and sexual deviance.

Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Revolution: Notes Towards an Understanding of the Cuban Lesbian and Gay Male Experience by Lourdes Arguelles and Ruby B. Rich [feminist studies], one of the earliest literary sources in this review, is a landmark essay published first in 1984 (republished, 1989). In addition to the valuable information and analysis, it challenges the 1980s academic trend of automatically criticising the regime and blaming it for homophobia. This approach encourages a deeper understanding of this complex subject, and the essay provides a pioneering view of the “gay Cuban paradox”, a major motif in the present thesis. Unfortunately, it lacks a real “inside” understanding of the complexity of gay identity evolution in Havana, especially during the 1990s, affected by the financial and social crisis, and the exposure to outside influences.

In addition to these primary sources, there are several post-1990s books regarding Latin-American homosexuality (Murray 1995, Green 1999, Rodríguez 2003). Some devote specific sections to Cuba, but tend to concentrate on Mexico and Brazil, where most of the research on the subject was carried out. *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexualities in Black Communities* (Constantine-Simms, ed. 2001), is dedicated to the subject of homosexuality among Africans-Americans in the U.S., and provides a source of reference and comparison to homosexuality among Afro-Cubans in Cuba.

As for gay participation in *santería* (Chapter 9) and other African-Diasporic religious practices – this subject has raised substantial interest in recent years, and even received a chapter in the GLBTQ online encyclopaedia and a mention in Encyclopaedia Britannica³³ *El Monte* (first published in 1954) by Lydia Cabrera [anthropology], the quintessential authority on the practice of *santería*, already hints at the presence of homosexuality in *santería* worship and in its mythology (the *patakiés*). Another “classic” on the subject of the femininity and homosexuality in African-Diasporic religion is *The City of Women* (1947) by Ruth Landes [anthropology], dedicated to Brazilian *candomblé*, a “sister religion” to Cuban *santería* which, due to lack of similar in-depth research into gender and sexuality in *santería*, was used as an important source of comparison.

Des dieux et des signes: initiation, écriture et divination dans les religions afro-

³³both quoting my essay about gays in *santería* in the *Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide* (Morad 2008:26-28).

cubaines (2000), by Erwan Dianteill [sociology] sheds significant light on the role of women and homosexuals in *santería* practices. Dianteill's sociological approach to aspects of gender and sexuality, his theory on the family-like relations between the *orishas* and the worshippers, and his definition of "social sex" as opposed to "physical sex", whereas "female social sex" includes effeminate homosexuals as well as women, became an important theoretical foundation for this work.

Gay participation in *santería*, as well as other African-Diasporic religious forms, is the subject of *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Participation in African-Inspired Traditions in the Americas* (2004), by Randy P. Conner [Queer/LGBT studies] with the participation of David Hatfield Sparks [ethnomusicology]. In addition to an overview of gender complexity and same-sex intimacy in Yorubaland and in the African-Diasporic religions, it offers extensive interviews with gay practitioners. The chapters which particularly contributed to the specific subject of this thesis were those dedicated to gender complexity in Yoruba tradition (pp. 2-30), and to *santería* (pp. 65-80; 106-111).

It is perhaps no coincidence, that some of the most important writing on *santería* are by writers known to be homosexual, such as Cabrera (above) and Tomás Fernández Robaina [anthropology], a researcher at the Biblioteca Nacional José Martí in Havana, who wrote *Hablen paleros y santeros* (1994), a book published in early Special Period Cuba, which includes many interviews with *santeros* and *paleros*. *Cuban Santería: Walking with the Night* (1993) was written by Cuban-born, gay *santero* (*santería* practitioner) and professor of religion, Raúl Cañizares, who served as head of the Orisha Consciousness Movement in Manhattan until his death in 2002. A related landmark book is *Biography of a Runaway Slave (Biografía de un Cimarrón)* by openly gay Cuban scholar Miguel Barnet [anthropology, sociology], an account on Afro-Cuban slave society, which includes religion and references to homosexuality in slave society, based on an authentic story of a runaway slave, told in his own words.

Gay/queer music

The true pioneer of "gay musicology" was British musicologist Philip Brett, who together with Elizabeth Wood wrote the introductory section entitled "Gay and Lesbian Music" in

the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.³⁴ Together with Gary C. Thomas, Brett and Woods he edited the first and principal anthology of the discipline, and first coined the name “gay musicology” in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (1994). While this anthology has the advantage of being a pioneering work, helping to establish and legitimise the field, it also faces the disadvantages resulting from this primary stage of inquiry and lacking a focused agenda and clear direction. Brett, Woods, and Thomas concentrate more on the homosexuality of musicians than on the relationship between music and homosexuality, as this thesis aims to do. Brett’s essay “Musicality, Essentialism and the Closet” (pp. 9-26) raises some fundamental questions that point to a universal connection between musicality and sexuality, while explaining homophobic tendencies among musicians in different societies, based on an effeminate/homosexual stigma attached to musicians and music in patriarchal *macho* societies.

That anthology was followed up, so to speak, by *Queering the Popular Pitch* (2006), edited by Sheila Whiteley [popular music studies] and Jennifer Rycenga [women’s studies], who focused on popular music, as a result of a conference of Popular Music Studies in 2003, which “provided a special space to revisit *Queering the Pitch*..., to evaluate the significance of the original text and to update the debates with specific reference to popular music discourse” (2006:xi). This second selection of essays added ethnicity and class into the equation, and dealt not only with global pop, rock, and rap, but also with “ethnic” genres, in a section entitled “Queering Boundaries”, of which three out of four chapters were dedicated to Latin music (Knights, Rey, Amico).

Masculinity studies is a relatively new area gaining growing interest within gender studies, and *Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music* (2007), edited by Freya Jarman-Ivens [popular music], is the first publication that examines the issue of masculinity in popular music, albeit from a Western perspective. The reflection, construction and negotiation of masculinity in popular music, as presented in this collection, served as a

³⁴ This essay, in spite of its historic merit, has caused much debate and dissatisfaction, especially among the authors who claimed it has been inappropriately edited without their consent, and therefore published online an “unexpurgated full-length original” of the article which I use as a source in this paper. (http://www.rem.ufpr.br/_REM/REMv7/Brett_Wood/Brett_and_Wood.html [accessed 3.12.2007]).

source of reference to similar processes in the popular music consumed in the gay *ambiente* in Cuba, and so the analytical approach, which, like mine, hinges on discourses and interpretations and appropriations of musical genres and environments.

The published research concerning gay dance music culture, as well as work on rave culture and electronic dance music culture in general concentrate on the Anglo-American and Eurocentric scenes, especially the US and UK (St John 2004, for example). Regardless of this specificity, they served as reference sources for subjects such as ritual behavior, tribalism and collective identity on the dancefloors. A work with similarities to my subject both in the time frame, social conditions, secrecy/clandestineness and in the methodological approach used, is Lewis and Ross' "A Select Body" (1995), investigating the early 1990s inner city "underground" gay parties scene in Australia, in the "light" of the AIDS epidemic.³⁵

Finally, given that the concepts of "music and identity" and "music as space" are the core of my argument, mention must be made of the "classics" on the subject published just before, or during, my research period, providing essential cornerstones for the theoretical framing of this thesis. These are: *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West* (1993), by Mark Slobin; *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place* (1994), by Martin Stokes; *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music* (1998), by Simon Frith; *The Place of Music*, a collection of essays edited by Andrew Leyshon, David Matless and George Revill (1998); and *Music, Space and Place: Popular Music and Cultural Identity* (2004), edited by Sheila Whiteley, Andy Bennett, and Stan Hawkins, featuring many of the theoretical debates facing contemporary musicology, and providing the theoretical bedrock upon which this thesis lies.

As argued in this literature review, the thesis relies on many different theories and sources on "trendy" themes in contemporary ethnomusicology, anthropology, and social

³⁵ Works that are less specific to this thesis, but provided important cornerstones in the theoretical framing process, involving queer theory and music are: Judith Butler's canonical work establishing queer theory (1999[1990], 1991, 1993a, 1993b, 1994); *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, that sheds light on the problematics of defining homosexuality, homophobia and "the closet"; *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (1994), by Moe Meyer, a crucial source for understanding the concept of Camp, defined by Susan Sontag as a "gay sensibility" (1964), one of the central themes in this thesis; *Music and Gender* (2002), edited by Pirkko Moisala and Beverly Diamond (with a Foreword by Ellen Koskoff); *Audible Traces. Gender, Identity and Music* (1999), edited by Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hamessley; *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender* (1997), edited by Sheila Whiteley;

sciences. By “combining” those themes it uncovers a clandestine scene which remained unnoticed by researchers who had come close but missed the gay *ambiente* in works about music in Cuba, and to the music “spaces” in works about the Cuban gay scene.

Chapter 3

Approach and theoretical background

Introduction

This chapter focuses on issues related to the approaches used in this thesis, namely the “gay” focus/bias, looking for “sameness” as well as “otherness”, the choice taken regarding the construction of the ethnography; and the way theories are used to implement and complement this approach.

The privileged parameter

Slobin suggests that surveying a musical scene is subject to “what are the *units* of analysis and what are the *levels* on which one works” (1993:9). He brings as an example the work of José Limón on the Mexican-American dance hall on which the units are “the reflexive ethnographer, the dancers, the musicians, the music/dance repertoire, the dress and codes of etiquette, the food and drink consumption, and so forth” (ibid.). The levels include “the plane of performance itself, the construction of a typical evening’s entertainments, the management of subcultural dance halls, the individual experiences and views of participants, the patterns of group interaction, the nature of gender relations, and even larger levels like *mexicano* culture” (ibid.).

Though the circumstances are completely different, many of these “units” and “levels” are also part of my own analysis. Slobin notes that “units and levels are only sketches here – it is not always easy to tell them apart” and he emphasises the point that “no matter what the frame of reference, privileging some parameters is inevitable” (ibid.). He admits that his own bias lead to his “microworlds” theory (ibid.). My “bias” or “privileged parameter” is of course the “gay” focus, an approach that may be seen by some as “homocentric”, but is essential in order to highlight the sometimes obscure path

of this particular investigation and uncover elements that without using a “pink lens” may remain unnoticed.

Sameness

Ethnomusicology’s coming of age is demonstrated in its ability to interrogate the familiar and the similar, not just the exotic and different” (Stokes 2008:209)

Approach issues in this research were “how different is it from any other gay scene?” and “do I look for the different or for the similar?” The environment, historical background, and the conditions of this subject group were definitely unique; but their attitude, reactions and interactions were, at least at first sight, similar to that of gay communities in other societies. Later, in the research, the similarities proved essential to the understanding of the scene. That is, the aspiration to be the “same” as the rest of the world, to be part of a “gay universe,” in defiance of the difficult and unique conditions of life in Special Period Havana and the very special character of the *ambiente* as a blend of local and global forces, ideas and concepts. “When was the last time an ethnomusicologist went out to discover sameness rather than difference?” asks Agawu (2004:109). This research project embraces and celebrates sameness. The uniqueness of the group and of its cultural and social background and conditions are presented and investigated in their own right, but at the same time so are the common human, global and “pan-Gay” elements in the *ambiente* and in the role music plays in it. “If difference is attributed to origin, tradition, separateness, hierarchy, or eternal ‘essentialism’, then sameness can be attributed to change, modernity, communication, equality, or evolving identities,” writes Su Zheng about gender and sexual politics in Chinese Music (1999:154). These are also the forces behind the social backbone of this thesis. By constantly pinpointing the difference, this investigation sheds light on the sameness, accelerated by the social changes during the Special Period, the opening to tourism, and the search for global “answers,” rather than relying on an isolated ideology. The ongoing tension between sameness and difference, global and local, is reflected in the way theoretical ideas are introduced and applied.

The use of theory

The theoretical construction blocks of this thesis are taken from different disciplines, (ethnomusicology, popular music, urban studies, queer theory, performance theory, to name a few). However, rather than creating a vague abstract theoretical mass, I have focused on my specific research area, and any theoretical discourse introduced is always strictly part of the observed and the interpreted. As Geertz wrote “It is not only interpretation that goes all the way down to the most immediate observational level: the theory upon which such interpretation conceptually depends does so also” (1973:28). Therefore, some of the theoretical material “borrowed” from related disciplines are suitably “applied to new interpretive problems” (ibid.:27).

One of the major “approach” issues in this thesis is “gay identity,” and making it the central axis around which this thesis revolves. Since the early 1990s, “gay identity” has been fiercely debated, deconstructed, and challenged by queer theorists and queer politics. In keeping with a grounded theory approach, I stay loyal to my informants and the circumstances “on the ground,” rather than to “queer political correctness.” “Gay identity” as a term was repeatedly used by informants and is the one I find most suitable to the circumstances in a society that, despite its many queer aspects, many of which will be described in this thesis, was not subject, during the research period, to American/“Western” queer theory philosophy and discourse, as I argue and demonstrate throughout the thesis.

Through his “-scapes” theory, Appadurai provides the term “ethnoscape” to examine the linkage between ethnic perceptions and space (Schetter 2005). “Ethnoscape” indicates a dynamic flow and mixture of people from different ethnic, geographic, and other backgrounds which create a human landscape. But in the case of this research, it is a local bounded “micro-ethnoscape”, rather than Appadurai's globalised spatial diffusion, closer to Anthony Smith's perception of ethnoscape as “the territorialisation of ethnic memory, i.e. the belief shared by ethnic groups in a common spatial frame of origin” (1996:440-458, Schetter 2005). That is, “The collective fiction that affiliation with an ethnic group is

related to a certain space....[as] ethnic groups 'make geography' and 'produce space' to legitimize their existence in space and time" (2005).

The *ambiente*'s ethnoscape concerns Havana's gay community as a whole³⁶ and the social and cultural forces that propel it. The "geography" it makes and spaces it "produces" are sometimes real (the Malecón) and sometimes fictional ("escapism"). Its members can be divided to three "origin" groups (rather than "ethnic")—*habaneros* (born and bred in Havana), *palestinos* (out-of-towners, migrants from the provinces)³⁷, and *extranjeros* (tourists).³⁸

Collective memory (spatial and other), as mention by Smith and Shetter, is part of the gay ethnoscape in Havana and some of the collective past traumas (the "grey period" UMAP, Mariel, et cetera).³⁹ Marginalisation, displacement, and the counter-reaction to these social conditions by creating a community and nurturing a sense of belonging and identification, are also themes strongly connected to Appadurai's ethnoscape theory, and discussed by his followers, including studies of urban music scenes, such as Maxwell's work about the hip-hop scene in Australia. (2003). Richard Guy Parker, who investigated homosexuality in Brazil, proposed "homoscape" as an "ethnoscape" based on (homo)sexuality, that is, "sexuality is part of a broader reconfiguration of life in the late twentieth century." (1999:220), and this idea is relevant to the evolution of a gay identity in Special Period Cuba, and the forces motivating it. Appadurai and followers' "scapes" theories and other theoretical pillars, such as Butler and followers' queer theory and Schechner's performance theory will be applied and sometimes challenged when relevant, according to the progress of the investigation of each "space" and the changing circumstances in the field and the findings.

My methodology is based on Glaser and Strauss' grounded theory model (1967), a "theory forming" framework/concept adopted from social sciences which involves the

³⁶ See footnote 23 about "gay" as ethnicity.

³⁷ The term *palestinos* (Palestinians) is used in Cuban slang to describe people migrating to Havana, especially from the eastern provinces, as if they were refugees. In Cuban street discourse it also has a racist and derogatory meaning: stupid, backward, "peasant". Source: <http://www.havana-guide.com/learn-spanish.html> (accessed 29.5.2010).

³⁸ Meaning strangers, foreigners, street discourse for tourists, used more than '*turistas*', taken from the official discourse to foreign visitors during the Soviet era, who were mostly USSR workers or visitors.

³⁹ See Appendix IV: Understanding Cuban Homosexualities.

generation of theory from data, and in a way working the opposite way to the traditional hypothesis-first scientific method (Martin and Turner 1986:141, Lewis and Ross 1995:230). Grounded theory reflects the “evolution of the research project, including the researchers’ experience (in the field and interview sessions), accumulative knowledge and skills, combined with theoretical assumptions and hypotheses (Lewis and Ross 1995:230). This methodological approach is suitable for long-term fieldwork in evolving situations. The first stage of my work included data collection, using different methods from which a group of codes, concepts and categories were extracted and form the basis for the theory, a “reverse engineered hypothesis” (Allan 2003). The use of a grounded theory method makes the relationship between data, theory and methodology bilateral and flexible, and affected by “the field” itself.

Musical geography: A theoretical model of music, space and place

One of the main theoretical frames used here is based on the relationship between music, space and place, with particular attention focused on the appropriation of urban spaces through urban genres such as dance music and hip-hop (e.g. Leyson, Matless and Revill 1998; Bennett 2000; Forman 2002, Maxwell 2003, Whiteley, Bennnett and Hawkins 2004; Baker 2006,). In spite of the global nature of popular music these days, it is still “spatial--linked to particular geographical sites, bound up in our everyday perceptions of place, and a part of movements of people, products and cultures across space.” (Connell and Gibson 2003:1). In this research, most of the music genres discussed (house, salsa, *reggaetón*, and even ballet), are indeed global, but in the context of this investigation I show how, by being appropriated as a signifier of identity and an interface for interaction, they are linked and bound up to particular spaces in Special Period Havana.

”[M]usic, like no other medium of discursive practice, acts simultaneously in space and in time... it is abstract, yet it is inevitably made and experienced as embodied...” (Leppert 1993:22), but its embodiment is essential to its function in the context of this research. It is embodied when it is danced by what I define as “the Cuban gay dancing

body” (see Chapter 7), and it is embodied when it gives a sense of “place” and belonging, and therefore becomes a “space” of identity.

Music is not only connected to geography; it can itself become a space and a “geographical site.” Music *as* space and as provider and marker of space has in recent years grabbed the attention of researchers from different disciplines. In particular, there is a developing interest in muscapes within contemporary geographical research (Smith 1994 quoted in Valentine 1995:482). Susan Smith argues for a more explicit incorporation of sound generally and music in particular into research in “human geography” and especially into those aspects of the subject concerned with cultural politics (Smith 1994:238, quoted in Valentine 1995:474). Valentine ties the interest of geographers in music with “the ability of music to produce different kinds of space to visual space” (ibid.), and demonstrates it in her essay about the music of K. D. Lang and the “queer space” it provides for a lesbian audience in heterosexual arenas (1995). This essay was published by the Institute of British Geographers and the Royal Geographical Society, and I will refer to it when looking at the creation of “queer spaces” in heterosexual arenas such as the Ballet Nacional or in *santería* religious ceremonies.

Stokes claims that “[t]he musical event, from collective dances to the act of putting a cassette or CD into a machine, evokes and organizes collective memories and present experiences of place with an intensity, power and simplicity unmatched by any other social activity” (1994:3). Such collective memories and “experience of place” are demonstrated throughout this work and particularly in the chapters on bolero and drag shows. However, unlike Bennett, Stokes and most music theorists who look at space and place *in* music, my focus is, in a reversed direction, music *in* space and music *as* space, where “space” is the main subject, active and vivid. Space is “not merely a container which human action transpires, but instead simultaneously a product and producer of action” (Fuoss 1998:109).

This thesis travels to different locations in Havana, starting with the “gay area” around the Malecón corner of Avenida 23⁴⁰, and moving to different places in the city where the action takes place, from the secret locations of the *fiestas* to the ballet theatre. When

⁴⁰ See maps in Fig. 4.2 & 4.3

using the term “place” in the context of this thesis, I rely on Casey’s theory that “place is more an *event* than a *thing* to be assimilated to known categories” (Casey 1996:26), and that “places not only *are*, they *happen* [my emphasis]” (ibid.,27). Space and time “come together in place...coordinated and co-specified in the common matrix provided by place” (ibid.,36). The places described in this thesis are therefore “events” rather than pure geographical locations, and are spatial as well as temporal, embodied, dynamic, and, as such, provoke and maintain motion as well as emotion (ibid., 22). For example, the Malecón in the corner of Calle 23, my primary fieldwork location, in spite of being an undistinguished part of a dilapidated cement wall separating the ocean from the road, normally abandoned at daytime, has its “spatial and temporal dimensions” and in the weekend evening, when it is “embodied” and “inhabited” by hundreds of gays, it becomes an “event”. Music is not only connected to place and empowers it, but according to Cohen can evoke, represent and *produce* it (1998:285), make it *happen*. This is the theoretical ground on which my hypothesis is based.

For the purpose of this investigation I decided to avoid the long and exhausting (yet intriguing) theoretical debate distinguishing between “place” and “space” and use the umbrella term “space” in a theoretical model featuring three complementary “space” categories which co-exist and co-nurture each other. Each of the musical scenes I describe in the thesis can be “catalogued” under one or more of the three categories: physical space, emotional *space*, conceptual *space*.⁴¹

Whereas the term ‘physical space’ is self-explanatory, the other two need to be explained. Emotional *space*’ is created when the music evokes emotions and provides a frame for these emotions to be expressed. Emotional *space* does not need a physical location, and in many cases offers an alternative to a hostile physical space, as described by one of my regular informants, Yadel (age 21):

I live with my aunts and uncles and kids everywhere. In the neighbourhood I have to pretend to be macho so they don't laugh at my family. So my only way to connect to my “gayness” is when I listen to my music at home in front of the mirror, and my mind takes me to other places (PersCom 1997).

⁴¹ the term “space” here applies both to its physical sense as an “extent set apart”, and in its allegorical sense as “the opportunity to assert or experience one’s identity or needs freely” (both definitions are from the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*). To differentiate between both concepts of space, whenever I use the term purely in the latter, allegorical connotation, the word *space* will appear in italics, but most times the two meanings are related and interconnected, in which case the roman form will be used.

Emotional *space* is generally more private, as it is an individual experience even if it takes place in a public space,⁴² for example, when listening to bolero in a club, but identifying with the emotional content expressed in the lyrics, at a very personal level.

Included in “emotional *space*” is escapism, an “imagined” *space*. Unlike nostalgia, which reflects yearning for “the good old days” and familiar places,⁴³ escapism takes you to an unknown, imagined, place. Cohen describes how music works as an escapist solution in the case of Jack, an elderly lonely Jewish immigrant from Eastern Europe in Liverpool who mentions American place-names from his favourite radio tunes which he does not even know where they are, but he finds comfort in imagining them (1998:279). Aurelio (age 43) describes a similar experience, where he closes his eyes while listening to bolero and imagines he is in Paris or Vienna, where he has never been. (PersCom, 1999)⁴⁴ If an elderly Jewish immigrant has anything in common with a Cuban *loca* it is the power of music to combat their loneliness at home, transcend the miserable reality of day-to-day life, and transport them to other, faraway, imaginary places.

Conceptual *space*, the third category, refers to a cognitive level of meaning, a space based on social concepts of “being homosexual” and “homosexual spaces,” some already recognised by the “general public” (such as drag shows), and some are “queer spaces” appropriated by gays within larger public spaces (Valentine 1995), such as in ballet performances and in *santería* rituals.⁴⁵ In a way, conceptual *space* is an extension of the emotional *space* into a “shared knowledge” and a shared emotional experience. In many cases we can say that the individually-experienced emotional *space* precedes, and prepares the ground for, the socially accepted conceptual *space*. Conceptual *space* is

⁴² On a discussion about the tension between private and public spheres in music see Leppert 1998:291-321

⁴³ From *nóstos*, a homeric word meaning “returning home” (Boym 2002).

⁴⁴ Escapism, in the context of this thesis, can either mean “escaping from” (i.e. a counter-reaction to the undesired physical place and condition you are in, by way of virtually “escape” from it), or “escaping to” (i.e. an act of imagination/fantasy, where the musical experience “relocates” you to another, imaginary and desirable, place). Indeed, I already mention escapism as part of the emotional *space* category, as it is motivated by emotion, but it also provides an imagined physical space: “When I close my eyes and listen to bolero, I feel I am on a stage full of flowers in the Olympia in Paris, with a red curtain, chandeliers, and round tables with bottles of champagne on them” tells me Aurelio while listening to bolero cassettes in the kitchen of his dilapidated flat in central Havana. (PersCom 1999).

⁴⁵ The term “conceptual space” is used in this context differently from Peter Gärdenfors’s theory of conceptual spaces, as described in *Conceptual Spaces: The Geometry of Thought* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000).

therefore most of the times more “public” than emotional *space*. Each one of the musical spheres I feature in this thesis can be categorised into one primary spatial category:

Fiestas – physical space

Drag shows – conceptual *space*

Ballet – conceptual *space*

Santería – conceptual *space*

Bolero- emotional *space*

Not only do these dimensions co-exist and overlap, but each of them incorporates the others to a certain extent. The physical spaces have emotional and conceptual qualities; and vice-versa, emotional and conceptual *spaces* obtain physical dimensions when through escapism, imagination and “relocation” one creates a new, phantasmagorical, “physical space”. For example, the *fiesta* is primarily a physical space, but also provides a conceptual queer *space* and an emotional *space* as will be described in chapters 6 and 7, whereas bolero is primarily an emotional *space*, but has conceptual and physical (real and phantasmagorical) aspects.

Structuring the ethnography according to spaces and levels of privacy

Privacy, both individual and as a group, is essential to construct and maintain a gay identity. Most urban societies provide a certain balance between private and public spaces, whereby the “private realm” pivots around the home, and the “public realm” indicates outdoor or social gatherings. In Special Period Havana, with the lack of suitable housing, the allocation system, and migration from the provinces, private spaces are very scarce. Havana’s apartments offer little or no privacy, as many young people are obliged to live with their families, or to share crowded accommodation.⁴⁶ Many times entire

⁴⁶ To understand the extent of the housing problem in Havana, here are data from a report published in 1998: “According to 1997 statistics, metropolitan Havana had over 2,200,000 inhabitants living in 560,000 dwellings. Of these, half were ranked as defective or in bad condition, while 60,000 were beyond repair and should be demolished. ... Internal migration has been a critical factor in the growth of Cuba's capital, which is considered beyond the capability to adequately support that population.” (Source: <http://www.amigospais-guaracabuya.org/oagjc005.php> [accessed 3.1.2009]).

families are forced to sleep in the same room, and the government provides *posadas* (hostels for Cuban residents) and rooms rented by the hours for married couples in need of privacy.⁴⁷ The situation is worse where same-sex couples are concerned. Apartments are not allocated to same-sex couples and gays who live with their families and have not come out yet, have to “resort to all sorts of subterfuges if they are to have sex in their own homes” (Lumsden 1996:155), in the tradition of Cuban *resolver*. Many gays introduced me to private rooms illegally rented by the hour, and in the case of gay Cuban couples who cannot afford to pay and need privacy, it is acceptable that friends offer their homes--or even their beds--to be used for sexual encounters.

The lack of private space is not only physical, but also has an emotional dimension. An emotional lack of *space* means that “you cannot be yourself,” even at your own home, unless you are “out of the closet,” as Yuseded, a history student and one of my regular informants (23) describes:

My boyfriend, who is a policeman, managed to get a big house in Miramar, but of course my sister and his sister who now came to study in Havana moved in with us. We did not tell them [that we are gay], and I don't think they even suspected. We told them Ricardo is a friend I met when I came to work in Havana and offered me to stay with him, as he has a big flat in Vedado. I have a small room connected to his, so we can sleep together and have sex at nights, but what I hate is that I cannot be myself, talk about things that interest me, listen to the music I like [bolero], and have to pretend to be macho, especially when my sister's *guajiro* [peasant, from the country-side] boyfriend is here. I wouldn't mind telling her, if I knew she wouldn't tell my parents. But she has a big mouth, and I am sure she would. Before that, when I didn't have my own place with Ricardo, I shared with four other *locas* who worked as *travesti* [drag queens] in parties, and I could scream, dress up, and do what I wanted, even masturbate if I see a good looking guy on TV. But now, I have a nice big house and a boyfriend, but I cannot really be myself. Only when I go to a fiesta... (PersCom 1999)

One of the ways to overcome the shortage of private space and achieve a certain degree of privacy, whether in a proper physical dimension, or even in an emotional dimension, is via the musical spaces, as I was told by Paquito (23):

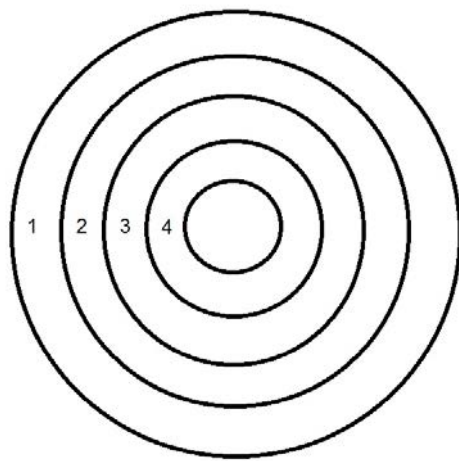
If I want privacy with a Cuban man, this is almost impossible. We have to ask a friend to give us a room in his home for a few hours, and this means he has to go out and be in the street or go to other friend's home. If we go to a [gay] *fiesta* we can at least kiss and be together, even though it is not private, but we don't always have the money for it. This is why it is easier [to have privacy] with a tourist than with a Cuban. But it is not only the

⁴⁷ Source: <http://www.amigospais-guaracabuya.org/oagjc005.php> (accessed 3.1.2009).

privacy to be with your *pareja* [partner], it is even the privacy to be in your own frame of mind.... (PersCom 1999)

Paquito's and other's testimonies of how the *fiestas* and other gatherings were used as isles of relative privacy within a public space led me to construct a model of concentric circles of relative privacy, which offers a Cuban alternative to the private/public dichotomy in the West. This system is crucial to gain an understanding of the creation and maintenance of gay identity in Havana, and the role of music in it.

Fig. 3.1: From public to private: Concentric circles of relative privacy



1. Havana
2. The *ambiente*
3. The outdoor “gay cruising” areas: The Malecón, and La Rampa
4. The “musical spaces”: *fiestas*, ballet, bolero soirées, drag shows, *santería* rituals

This circular model also explains the flow of the gay ethnoscape/homoscape in Havana, the spatial dimension of this investigation, and the “zooming-in” technique I use in this ethnography:

Circle 1, Havana as a whole, is a space which provides a certain degree of privacy, *laissez-faire*, and gay identity to *habaneros* and gay Cubans migrating from the provinces.

Circle 2 is Havana's gay *ambiente* in general, a rather lucid conceptual virtual space which not only encompasses levels 2 and 3, but also encompasses the history, psychology, politics and economy of Cuban homosexualities.

In circle 3, we find the "outdoors" public places frequented by gays such as the Malecón, La Rampa and the cafés in Avenida 23 where I conducted most of my initial observations, interviews and personal communications. A map is provided in chapter 4 (Fig.4.3).

Circle 4 is the heart of this thesis. This circle encompasses semi-private closed/bound events, where queer spaces are created, either exclusively (as in the *fiestas*, bolero *fiestas* and drag shows), or as a space-within-a-space such as performances of the Ballet Nacional or *santería* rituals and as will be described in chapters 8 and 9. These musical spaces are the main subject of this investigation. Gay bars and clubs, the most obvious gay social spaces in other societies, are not included in this model, as they are non-existent during the research period. Dedicated gay and gay-friendly bars and clubs used to exist in Havana when I started my fieldwork (such as the El Joker discotheque in La Rampa, and Cafe Fiat in the Malecón), but they were soon closed down during the police's "cleansing" operations. There are some bars, cafes, and one noted ice-cream parlour (Bim Bom) frequented by gays especially on weekends, but they are not gay venues as such. The only gay bar active (clandestinely) during the period of research was the drag show venue Bar de Las Estrellas, which I describe in Chapter 8.

The ethnographic part of this thesis (Chapters 6-10) is dedicated to circle 4. The structure of the ethnography follows a horizontal/landscape model, viewing the socio-musical landscape moving from one to another. Repetitions of some ideas and concepts in different chapters are therefore unavoidable, as some essential social, economic and cultural factors are found in each of the different spaces. Using the landscape analogy, this can be compared to looking at different segments of a certain topographical landscape, and noticing how each segment and those who populate it are affected by the same weather conditions. For example, a sudden rainstorm will most likely disturb more people sunbathing on the beach than those inside their homes in the village, just like a police "cleansing" campaign will interfere more with the *fiestas*, than with those listening

to bolero at home, or going to the ballet.⁴⁸

Each of the ethnographic chapters will bring descriptions of musical moments witnessed, will define the segment within the gay *ambiente* which participates in this activity, and will bring an overview of my field experiences and the informants I have mostly used in gathering the data on this specific scene, as well as my relations with them. I will then go into a deeper analysis of the scene, put it in the general context of life in Special Period Havana. The activity I witnessed and its larger social / historical context will then be put in a theoretical context for analysis. In the Conclusion, all the five different scenes described and analysed will be amalgamated and, adopting Ratner's methodological system (2002), the central themes extracted from meaning units in conversations and observations will be presented, thus creating the "big picture" of the role of music in the *ambiente* as a whole.

⁴⁸ To avoid many repetitions of the common "weather conditions", I chose to elaborate on a repeating idea/concept in one of the chapters, where it holds a major role or mentioned first (for example, Camp sensitivity, in the drag shows section in chapter 8), and in other chapters only to mention it, focusing on the way it functions and is reflected, (for example, about Camp in bolero).

Chapter 4

In the field: Methodology and ethics

Introduction

This chapter introduces my field methodology and the ethical challenges I faced and how I dealt with them. It starts with my “positioning” in the field – outsider and insider, participating-observant and observing-participant, subjective and objective, and shows the way all of these dichotomies co-existed and overlapped during my field research. I will then proceed into a detailed description of my fieldwork strategy, the choice of methodology, and the challenges it posed - from the ways of obtaining information and discourse analysis to ethics.

Outsider/ insider

In the course of my fieldwork I found myself repeatedly oscillating back and forth from being a participating observer to an “observing participant”⁴⁹

How “foreign” was I to the field in question? In some ways I was foreign, and in others I was not. I am not Cuban, but I am gay. On several occasions I sensed, and was told by my informants, that they found more common ground and were more open to share information with me than they might with a Cuban researcher who was not gay. While observing the scene I had a clear advantage in understanding and decoding subtle nuances, non-verbal signals, and body-language, such as eye-contact, mannerisms,

⁴⁹A term used by Kaminski, who explored prison subculture while he was a political prisoner in Poland in 1985 (Kaminski 2004:7); and, more specifically related to my case, a process described by Bolton who discusses fieldwork in sexual minority subcultures by anthropologists who are themselves lesbian or gay, allowing a different sort of access to the community (Bolton 1995:140–167).

“gaydar”⁵⁰ and gay sensitivities such as Camp⁵¹, a decoding process which will be an important part of the discourse analysis throughout this work.

What indeed is the field in this thesis, and to what extent am I an insider? The answer is rather complex. On the ground, level it seems quite obvious - the field is the gay *ambiente* in Havana during the Special Period and its known and less-known meeting places. On another level the field is imaginary, involving feelings and associations, appropriations and identity-formation, feeling gay and acquiring a gay identity via music. The field is one, but multi-layered, therefore requiring different layers of examination and interpretation.⁵²

As will be discussed in the next chapter, gay tourists are an important component of the *ambiente*, and contribute to its character and evolution. As a gay *extranjero*, I belong to the *ambiente*'s ethnoscape, as argued in in the next chapter. As the emotional level, I share many of the feelings, associations and perspectives with the group I investigate. Contemporary ethnomusicology, according to Slobin, encourages investigating “the ethnographer’s self as the field” (Slobin 1993:3), which is partially what I am doing here. Slobin's suggestion to the outsider/insider researcher is to refrain from over-reflexivity, and be “reflective, but not ostentatiously reflexive” (ibid.:4) . I adopted this advice for my fieldwork and analysis.

Another trap I tried to avoid is what Hannerz describes as a tendency of participant-observer anthropologists, especially in marginalised groups, towards encapsulation “as a mode of field existence” (1980:312). In my field trips to Havana I tried to avoid being encapsulated” in small groups and networks and even in the *ambiente* as a whole. I met, socialised with, and interviewed over 200 individuals/informants who belong to different milieus within and outside the gay community.

⁵⁰ “Gaydar” = “gay + radar”, in gay discourse : the intuitive ability of gays to detect other gays around you, even when not obvious.

⁵¹ Camp is an aesthetic perception which celebrates the “love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (Sontag 1964), associated with “gay sensitivity” (ibid.) Camp is discussed in detail in Chapter 8.

⁵² There are different levels of interpretation to each phenomenon observed, and my challenge was to either bring all, or identify the relevant one. In Appendix V I expand on Geertz’s “levels of interpretation” theory (1973), and the relevance of this theory to this thesis.

Subjectivity

“If you made so many friends there, how could you stay objective?” asked a student in a lecture I gave about my fieldwork. The methodology used in this thesis is based on observation/interpretation and discourse analysis, none of which can or should avoid being subjective. This research is about attitudes, perspectives, feelings, beliefs, desires, symbolism, interpretations, and reflections; hence, there is no place here for detachment or a supposedly objective approach.

Postmodern thought counters the counterpoising of subjectivity and objectivity. “There is no means of declaring that the world is either out there or reflected objectively by an ‘in here’”, claims Gergen (2001:805) and adds: “To tell the truth...is not to furnish an accurate picture of what actually happened but to participate in a set of social conventions”(ibid.:806). Ratner claims that not only objectivism does not oppose subjectivity, but it

integrates subjectivity and objectivity because it argues that objective knowledge requires active, sophisticated subjective processes—such as perception, analytical reasoning, synthetic reasoning, logical deduction, and the distinction of essences from appearances. Conversely, subjective processes can enhance objective comprehension of the world (2002:2)

As for the area of sexuality and music, “issues of subjectivity, identity, and sexuality are pertinent to [musical] textual analysis” (Whitley 2000). McClary explains that “not coincidentally, many of the theorists who first raised these issues [subjectivity] operated from positions previously disenfranchised by the mainstream: women, gay individuals, persons of color, and those who grew up in colonial or postcolonial contexts” (2002:xvi).

Judgment and valuation are other issues strongly connected with subjectivity which pose a fieldwork challenge, especially when relying on “non-expert” subjects that are part of the field being researched. It is also a challenge to the researcher, especially when touching upon subjects such as *jineterismo*, prostitution and sex-work, exploitation, *machismo* and homophobia. In the scene covered here, it is easy to let one’s sense of morality and justice enter the data and the analysis. While some objective caution is needed, it is important not to avoid the discussion on values and morality, especially when expressed by the informants, as this discussion affects the field and becomes part of

the discourse, rather than how justified it is. As Ratner puts it: "According to postmodernists, we can't know what effects our values really have on culture . . . We can only *talk* about the effects our values have as we construe them through linguistic conventions" (2002:6). Here is an example to this I encountered in the first year of my fieldwork: When interviewing C., a white Cuban anthropologist and a Catholic priest) who researches Afro-Cuban heritage, he kept referring to *santería* derogatorily as "primitive" and "immoral". Only later did I understand that the religion's "immorality" according to him is related to its tolerance of and popularity among homosexuals which he found "revolting and blasphemous" (PersCom 1995). This homophobic comment was among my first encounters with the "gay friendliness" of *santería*. It confirmed some of my early field observations, and encouraged me to investigate it further.

Longitudinal fieldwork

My fieldwork in Havana followed a longitudinal approach (Huber and Van de Ven 1995, Saladaña 2003). It consisted of eight separate visits ranging from 3 to 6 weeks in duration, over a period of twelve years. This schedule and approach enabled me to monitor the changes and processes taking place, and to verify data through repeating visits in different periods. In the first stage of my research I developed a social network by frequenting gay gathering places, making new acquaintances, meeting networks of friends, and re-establishing regular touch with them thereafter. Network systems keep evolving and changing, which pose both an advantage and a challenge during fieldwork, as Hannerz writes "network chains run on without a visible end, new faces keep showing up while others drift out of the picture unpredictably" (1980:313).

The fact that I have re-visited Havana frequently over a long period, rather than staying there once for a set period of time, helped me in gathering reliable information. Some informants have kept in touch with me, knowing that I was to return to Havana and meet them again (due to the circumstances, gays in Havana rarely disappear from the scene, or re-locate). Through this process of re-visiting I also met new informants, some of them known to earlier ones, whose testimonies I could cross-reference with the

information I had previously accumulated, and so forth. Ultimately, this guaranteed an accurate and reliable body of information to work with.

When it comes to research in an urban environment, Hannerz is in favour of extending fieldwork in time through recurrent periods in the same field, where "one can pick up threads not so far from where one left them." (ibid.:311). He emphasises the need for a long time span in order to understand fluidity in urban social organisation (ibid.) and the transformations in people's life situations "as, over the years, they fit differently into networks and the role inventory" (ibid.).

The investigation of an evolving scene (the *ambiente*), affected by an evolving (gay) identity, required a longitudinal research. One of my main comparison sources, Lewis and Ross' research of the gay dance party culture in Sydney (1995) was based on short periods of fieldwork in a time span of three years, and the authors claimed that "the longitudinal in-field research procedure... helped the researcher to monitor the social evolution of the gay dance party milieu ..." (1995:219).

In my case, a one-year field work in 1995 or in 2007 would have produced completely different isolated pictures, and would not be able to show the process and the changes along the time, as presented in this thesis.

The following is a list of my fieldwork trips, their main focus/purpose and findings [in square brackets], and number of events attended.⁵³ Though not originally planned in this model, each of the fieldwork trips involved all scenes/activities. I kept myself open to changes in plans and attuned to what was going on and the information obtained. As per the grounded theory approach, investigation directions and focuses were constantly altered and modified according to the action in the field. As Barley has put it:

[R]egardless of calculated attempts at discipline, [longitudinal] fieldwork inevitably intensifies the tensions, the relationships, and the serendipitous events that influence all research. It is in the precarious balance between the controlled and the uncontrolled, the cognitive and the affective, the designed and the unexpected that fieldwork finds its distinctive vitality and analytic power" (1995:2)

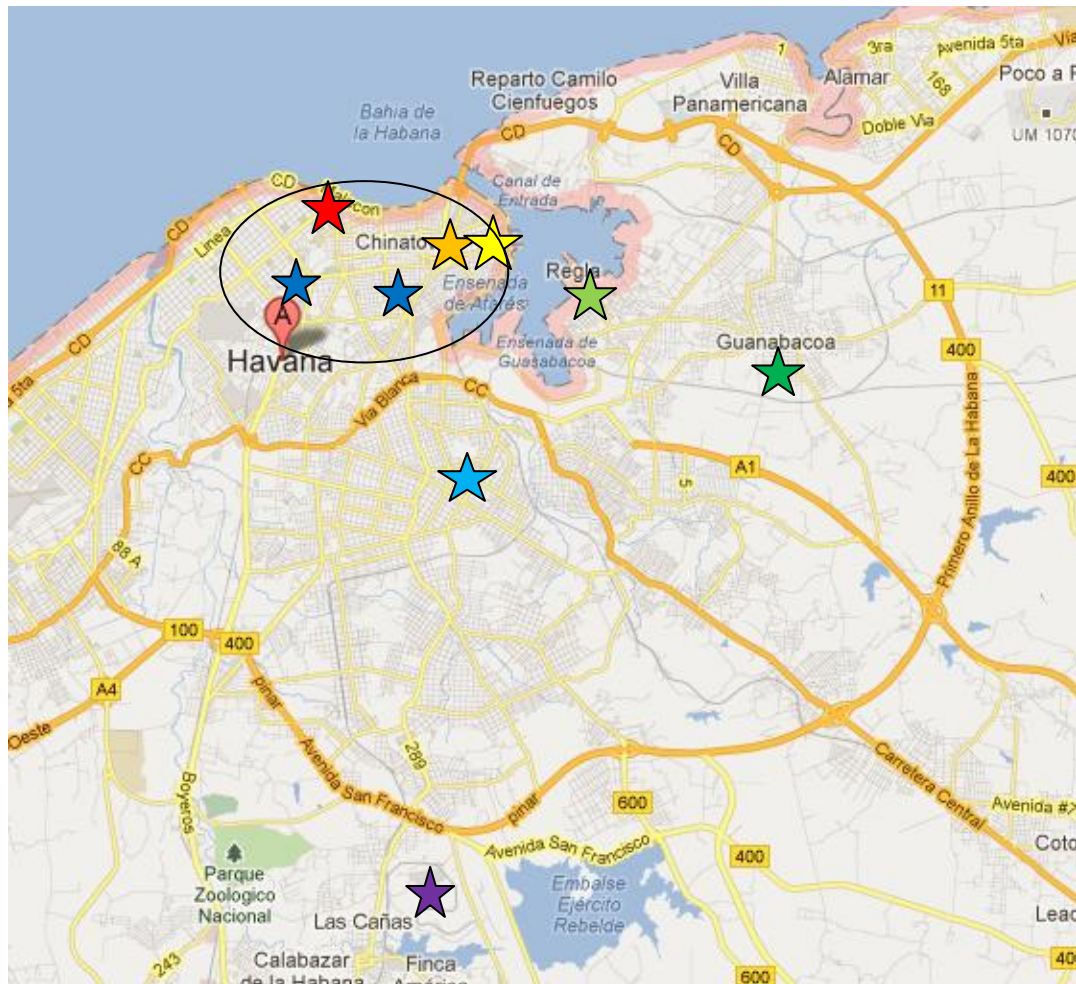
⁵³ I attended other cultural/musical events during my fieldwork, such as rumbas, Palo Monte rituals, classical music events et cetera. However, I have mentioned in the list only the events that related to the relevant spaces I identified and decided to include in this thesis.

Fig. 4.1 Fieldwork trips

	<i>“big” fiestas de diez pesos</i>	<i>home fiestas</i>	<i>drag shows</i>	<i>live music</i>	<i>ballet</i>	<i>santería ceremonies</i>	<i>bolero fiestas</i>
Dec. 1995	2	3	2	4	2	1	1
[Main activity: creating a social network of informants and “checking the ground,” experiencing different musical/cultural related events, social gatherings and scenes, marking main “scenes” to be further investigated]							
Jan. 1997	4	4	1	3	0	2	1
[Main activity: expanding social network, interviews and PersComs, concentrating on the <i>fiestas</i> and bolero scenes]							
July 1998	3	2	1	5	0	2	0
[Main activity: repeat interviews/PersComs with previous year’s informants to check consistency, assessing changes in scene, concentrating on the <i>fiesta</i> scene and the live music scene, and tourists/local interaction]							
Dec. 1999/ Jan. 2000	3	2	4	6	4	4	2
[Main activity: PersComs assessing changes in scene, concentrating on the <i>fiestas</i> scene, the drag scene and <i>santería</i>]							
July 2001	3	2	2	4	0	3	0
[Main activity: changes in music, the <i>reggaetón</i> explosion, the bolero scene, the live music scene, tourist-local interaction]							
Dec. 2003	4	3	2	3	4	3	2
[Main activity: changes/evolution in music, in tourists/local interaction and in the gay scene. concentrating on bolero and <i>santería</i>]							
Oct. 2005	2	2	3	3	1	3	1
[Main activity : changes/evolution in <i>reggaetón</i> (the Cubanisation of the genre), concentrating on drag and ballet]							
Dec. 2006/ Jan. 2007	4	2	4	5	4	4	0
[Main activity: “wrapping up” fieldwork. Repeat interviews and PersComs with long-term informants. Comparing, testing and challenging my findings both by repeat critical attendance in events, assessing the accuracy and relevance of findings by examining and challenging them in PersComs and interviews with long-term and new informants. Evaluation of findings, relevance, and changes through time.]							

Fieldwork geography: Maps of fieldwork sites

Fig. 4.2 Havana – main fieldwork locations



○ Central Havana / tourist area

★ Malecón “gay area” (see detailed map in Fig. 4.3)

★ Parque Central (cruising area) / Gran Teatro (ballet)

★ Habana Vieja/Old Havana (home drag-show and bolero parties, *santería* rituals)

★ Regla (*santería* rituals)

★ Guanabacoa (*santería* rituals)

★ Lawton (Drag shows / Bar de Las Estrellas)

★ Centro Habana/Central Havana + Vedado (home *fiestas*)

★ Parque Lenin (*fiestas de diez pesos*)

Fig. 4.3 Map -Havana's “gay area”, Vedado (circle 3 in Fig.3.1)



- ★ Malecón
- ★ Bim Bom ice-cream parlour
- ★ Café P y 23
- ★ La Arcada, M y 23
- ★ Yara Cinema

(Map Sources: Google Maps)

Photos 4.1, 4.2 The Malecón.

Photos taken in 1997 at 8am and at 6pm. Note the lack of cars on the main road leading to/from central Havana, during both “rush hours”.⁵⁴ The “gay area” is circled. (photos: Moshe Morad).

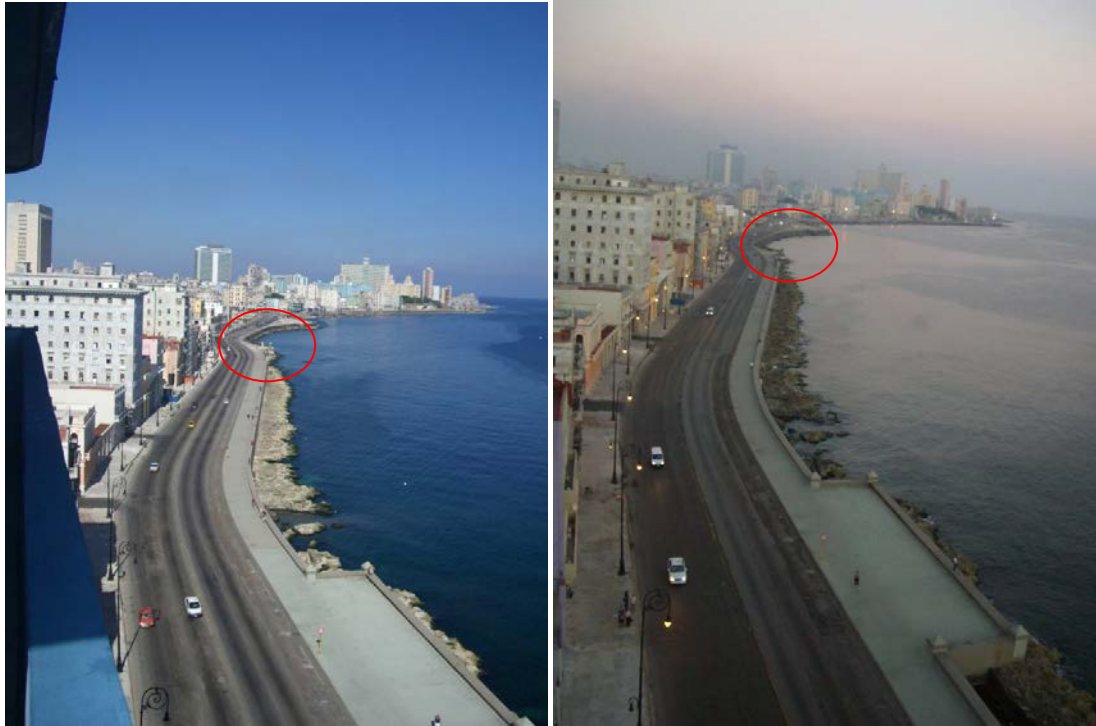


Photo 4.3

The Yara cinema at night. The “starting point” to the *fiestas*. (Photo: Moshe Morad, 2000)



⁵⁴ The lack of cars, one aspect of the financial crisis during the Special Period is relevant to the dependence on tourists for transportation to the *fiestas* (Chapter 6), and the obsession of Cubans with cars, as will be described in Chapter 6 in relation to the song “La gasolina”.

Photos 4.4, 4.5 The Malecón “gay area” on a Friday night (Photo: Moshe Morad 1999).



Photo 4.6 6 years later, just as dark. The Malecón “gay area” on a Friday night.
(Photo: Moshe Morad, 2005).



Photo 4.7 Bim Bom ice-cream parlour (Photo: Moshe Morad, 2005).



Fieldwork challenges and strategy

While in the field, I faced two methodological challenges typical to fieldwork in an urban environment: finding the timing and locations of the activities (not an easy task when they are clandestine), and multitasking. The activities investigated are not on-going but they only take place at certain times and different “scenes” may take place simultaneously in different parts of town. In his work on urban anthropology, Hannerz writes: “An around-the-clock commitment to field work may at times be impracticable in an urban study, since some units of study are themselves only part-time phenomena” (1980:310). This is exactly the case here, certain aspects and activities of the *ambiente* only apply in certain times, such as the weekend *fiestas*, drag shows, the ballet season, and the *santería* saint-days, among others. A diachronic approach is part of the long and segmented fieldwork process. I found myself at times rushing in the middle of the night from one *fiesta* to another, and sometimes even to a late-night *santería* ceremony in between.

Another challenge I faced was the need to constantly multitask. As each period in the field only lasted 3 to 6 weeks, I found myself, at any given period engulfed in all aspects of fieldwork including acquiring information, cross-examining, expanding the social network, documenting, analysing and testing the results. Research segments overlapped, and I found myself performing a variety of roles, sometimes simultaneously—‘hanging out’ along the Malecón’s gay section and my other ‘starting point’ locations such as the “Bim Bom” ice-cream parlour, the Yara cinema and Parque Central (see Fig. 4.3), interviewing and handling conversations with many informants during the week, attending *fiestas* at weekends, religious rituals, ballet performances, and of course spending hours digesting the data collected, transcribing, writing up descriptions and findings. Another activity I was constantly engaged in was improvising ways of either coding or hiding “problematic” data in order to avoid having it on my laptop in case of a police raid or an airport supervision when leaving Cuba, or having it stolen in one of the *casas particulares* (rental rooms in private homes) where I used to meet with my informants, which happened a couple of times when my voice-recorder and video-camera, which included many hours of interviews and important data, were stolen. I often

emailed data to myself via slow and expensive internet connections, trying to avoid “spying eyes” in hotel internet desks. Another time-consuming activity during my fieldwork was communicating with my informants or with new contacts using Cuba’s non-efficient telephone system which involved, at least in the first years of my fieldwork, before mobile phones became available to locals, spending hours at public phones (when they operated properly), hoping that my *amigo* (friend) on the other side was indeed within reach of the telephone or that the privileged neighbour who had the nearest phone would be kind enough to call him to the phone.⁵⁵ Due to the nature of my research, interviews and data-collecting were mostly carried out during the evening and night-time (sometimes very late at night/early morning, after *fiestas*), while daytime was used for transcribing, writing, correcting, re-writing and planning.

Using a grounded theory approach meant I needed to quickly digest and analyse the findings once “in the field” and plan the next steps according to this analysis, and did not have the luxury of some traditional researchers who use fieldwork only to gather data which they decipher and analyse once they return home.

Fieldwork in my case also involved allowing plenty of time for observation which offered “the opportunity for serendipity, that is the emergence of significant unanticipated discoveries...in [a] previously unresearched area” (Lewis and Ross 1995:216). Observing and analysing behaviour patterns was an important tool for gathering and verifying information. Interpreting and analysing behavioral patterns, sorting “winks from twitches and real winks from mimicked one” as per Geertz famous analogy (1973: 16), raised another challenge, which I overcame by way of testing and verifying my own interpretations against those of other informants.

I chose to stay at modest *casas particulares* which became “safe havens” for in-depth conversations with my informants, given that hotels were out of the question (until 2008, Cubans were not allowed to enter hotels), and public places were under constant watch of the vigilant eyes of the police, who at best intimidated my informants, and at

⁵⁵ Mobile phones and internet were non-existent in the first years of my fieldwork and later on towards the late 1990s when they supposedly became available they were not only very expensive to use on my side, but were only accessible by the very privileged (and the sponsored) on the other side.

worst openly harassed them. Most of the *casas particulares* where I stayed belonged to gays, a fact that made my invited informants feel at ease, and also provided a further source of information, enhancing my network of informants.

From a rapidly expanding social network, I had a selection of a handful of informants and close allies, with whom I spent many hours socialising, communicating, and observing (people in Havana have ample free time). In some cases, I applied a classic shadowing technique, whereby I followed and observed (with permission) an informant for up to twelve hours, from his home to the street and back, in various gathering spots and stuck close by him on the Malecón so I could follow his conversations with other gay locals and tourists; or I would follow him into one of the musical spaces discussed in this paper (i.e., *fiestas*, drag shows, et cetera.), and then back home. On many occasions I also used a “fly on the wall” approach, eavesdropping on conversations, in which case I use the information when needed, but never as direct quotes.

A qualitative/quantitative mix

Informal conversations and personal communications

Via this growing social network and the numerous hours I spent in “deep hanging out” (Geertz 1998:69) along the Malecón and other sites of Havana’s *ambiente*, I became involved in many informal conversations, some initiated by me and some by others. In fact, due to the nature of this research and the fieldwork involved, and the clandestine and liminal nature of the *ambiente*, the main field method applied for gathering information was, in fact, based on these informal conversations and “leads”. The advantage is the direct, unmediated, access to the subjects and the scene, and the disadvantage is of course the need to constantly assess, challenge and test the credibility of sources and their motives for collaboration.

One of the main fieldwork challenges was that my informants were part of a group which is under constant police scrutiny and harassment. Although most of them were friendly and talkative, some were hesitant about the *extanjero* trying to obtain information about a scene which operated clandestinely. My previous experience in

encouraging people to talk, as a journalist, broadcaster, airport security officer, and in research among illegal labour migrants (Morad 2005), helped me in this process. In the last section of this chapter dealing with ethics in the field, I will highlight the ethical issues involving this kind of data collecting and how I dealt with them.

Unlike interviews where the interviewee agrees in advance to be interviewed, is asked specific questions and agrees to be recorded or transcribed, PersComs quotes are part of an informal, direct, and unmediated conversation, where in many cases the true nature of the casual interview is only revealed during or after the conversation, and only quoted if the informant agrees. PersComs therefore must be appraised and analysed with caution. Cubans are friendly people and like to talk and share information, yet, we must not forget that in Cuba “private” spaces are never really private, and people are in constant fear of a nearby policeman or a member of the CDR⁵⁶ member is always present. It is unrealistic to expect people who cannot leave their country, and who earn in an entire month what you normally spend on one meal, to see eye-to-eye with you. These interpersonal hurdles must be taken into account when processing and analysing the data collected, and in many cases one has to learn to read between the lines. I have been selective with the PersComs quoted, filtering them not only by relevance, but also by credibility and the conditions under which they were communicated.⁵⁷

My relationships with PersCom informants ran between a casual meeting and conversation along the Malecón, a bar, a *fiesta*, a party or a religious gathering, to longer acquaintances, repeating meetings (sometime over a few years), and even long-lasting friendships. These different kinds of relationship may have affected the genuineness of the information given. To overcome this problem, the data on which I established facts and conclusions were extracted from various informants who have no acquaintance with one another, and with whom I had different kinds of relations. I processed the data using Ratner's (2002) proposed method of amalgamating the collective experience obtained from the various testimonies. Ratner suggests extracting “meaning units” out of the

⁵⁶ Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (Comités de Defensa de la Revolución) are neighborhood organisations established in order to report “counter-revolutionary” activity in the neighborhood and to organize local projects and events.

⁵⁷ I used various verification methods, some of which I learnt when working as a security officer at Heathrow Airport and as a journalist, such as cross-referencing testimonies, asking open-ended questions, inserting test questions the answers of which are known to me, et cetera.

various conversations and grouping them into “central themes;” that is, using statistical methods on subjective personal conversations and observations of behavioural patterns. The central themes extracted will appear throughout the thesis and will be consolidated into common central themes in the conclusion.

In terms of interpretation, the sources’ subjectivity was frequently an advantage rather than a disadvantage. This thesis deals with levels of interpretation, and I was, in many cases, more concerned with my informants’ viewpoints and interpretations than with obtaining objective data from them.

The quotes extracted from informal conversations, mostly dealing with interpretation rather than with facts, are marked PersCom. I usually use in each case only one representative quote to illustrate the data and advance the narrative, but each such quote represents a wider spectrum of similar views/information that I obtained. When relevant, I will disclose my relationship to the informants. In appendix I I bring a list of all quoted PersCom informants, their age, and the year the quoted conversation took place.

Mini survey questionnaires

To verify, challenge, and support my observations, impressions, and the data gathered from PersComs, I carried out small surveys (among 20–40 informants each). These surveys are usually employed in cases where strict visual or empirical evidence is not relevant or available--as in cases of emotions and impressions in relation to musical genres, musical events and interactions (for example between gay tourists and gays)-- and they are therefore cognitive in nature. Defenders of participant observation find greater bias in supposedly objective survey questionnaires and similar allegedly neutral instruments which involve the imposition of an externally conceived scientific measuring device (the questionnaire) applied to individuals whose perception of reality does not tally with that external conception (Garson 2010, on Bruyn 1966). My mini survey questionnaires complement and confirm qualitative data gathered by PersComs, interviews, and case studies, and are based on an internal, local conception rather than on an abstract, external one. I designed the questionnaires only after completing many PersComs on the subject.

A similar “mix” of qualitative and quantitative methods has been implemented in other researches similar to mine, for example, Conner and Sparks (2004:319-324). In the context of urban anthropological research, Hannerz calls the implementation of a qualitative-quantitative mix “the most obvious form of triangulation” (1980: 312). When pieced together, the combination of thick descriptions of case studies, observation of behaviour patterns, PersComs, small survey questionnaires, and interpretations, create the “big picture”.

Extra-academic expertise applied in the field

In my research, I also draw on strategies and expertise from my professional background as a musician, record-industry executive, broadcaster, and journalist. As a record company executive and radio broadcaster, I compiled and broadcasted Cuban music and had close contacts with Cuban musicians and industry executives who were of great assistance during my fieldwork. As a journalist, I covered different aspects of life and culture in Cuba, such as the gay scene in Havana (*Attitude Magazine* 2007), and homosexuality in Afro-Cuban religion (*Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 2008).

In addition to having access to information and new ideas, I have found my journalistic experience of great help in my methodology which was based on unmediated discourse and interpretation. In his own research of popular music in Haiti, American ethnomusicologist Gage Averill similarly found himself wearing two hats, as both researcher and journalist: “My research and feedback methodology evolved to take advantage of my music journalist alter ego.” (Averill 1997:xxi). This concept of feedback methodology has been applied extensively also throughout the present thesis. Journalists are trained to listen to others and not only to themselves, and keep their ears attuned in order to obtain information. Consequently, I found myself regularly conversing with people, eavesdropping, absorbing and testing information, asking questions, and obtaining feedback. Another term Averill adopts that can also describe my approach is “dialogic ethnography,” a concept which “implies a subject position that allows the ethnographer to engage in a sympathetic, culturally informed dialogue of cultures without suspending entirely his or her own critical judgment” (ibid.).

Pruett describes his fieldwork among Nashville folk artists, “sharing an artist’s tour bus or backstage dressing room” (Ethnomusicology 2011:22) with music journalists, and claims that in spite of the difference in analysis and discourse, “scholarly research and music journalism are not necessarily at opposite ends of the musical spectrum”(ibid.). The difference between both, according to Pruett, is not related to music or musicality, or the value of investigation, but “is more an enactment of social experience” which he described as “the cultural distance that separates listening to music from writing about music” (ibid.). I argue that when investigating “music *as...*” the “social experience” of the researcher and the investigating reporter comes even closer. I did use on several occasions during my fieldwork both my “journalist” hat (and technique), as well as my “music producer” hat as “door openers”, but always disclosing, when using the information obtained and especially when quoting an informant, the true (academic) nature of my investigation. This leads me into the subjects of ethics in the field.

Ethics in the field: from exposure to erotic subjectivity

The clandestine nature of gay life in Havana during the Special Period raises some importantethical issues regarding the ways I collected, processed, and presented information.

As far as the authorities are concerned, for obvious reasons I chose to work outside the parameters of the system. Before entering the country, I did not apply for a research visa. Doing so would have brought me under the scrutiny of the authorities, which would have undermined my research activities. Any official monitoring of my activities would have prevented many potential informants from collaborating with me, and would have put those who did at risk. It is important to note that all my research was carried out completely independently; I have never been sponsored or supported by Cuban authorities, Cuban solidarity groups, or by oppositional organisations.

Since I use many quotes from informal conversations (PersComs), it is important to clarify how open I was with my informants regarding the purpose of my probing questions. Whenever I engaged in a personal conversation that was longer than a passing

comment or a quick informal chat, I always disclosed the purpose of my questions, sometimes at the beginning of the conversation, but more often in the middle or at the end. All of the PersComs quoted are from informants who knew about my research project, and gave their consent to be quoted. In order to protect them, however, I have used first names only, and in some cases, where there was a fear they might be identified by their first name, I used pseudonyms starting with the same letter as their real name. The photos in this thesis, showing identifiable faces, were taken and used with permission.

When I quote experts or informants who were not concerned with being exposed, and I felt their exposure would not put them in any kind of trouble, I used their name in full.⁵⁸ Whatever the case, when relevant, the genuine age of the informant is provided, along with the year that the conversation took place (for example: Juan, 22, PersCom 2001).

Sometimes, in cases of organisations, party organisers, and so forth, my initial contact started by using my other roles as a journalist and a music-industry executive; however, at the end of the conversation I always made it clear that I was working on a research project about gay life in Havana, and that some of the information they were giving me might be used. None of my respondents objected.

One major concern in this kind of fieldwork is to not put informants at risk and to respect their desire for discretion and anonymity. It was essential, therefore, not to either embarrass or put anyone in any dangerous position in the course of my research. The daily reality is that both police and local CDR surveillance are ever-present, and the *ambiente* itself lives in constant harassment. During my early visits to Havana (between 1994 and 1999), locals were reluctant to walk with foreigners in the streets in certain areas, and there were incidents when my Cuban informant and I had to walk separately so as not to attract police attention or raise suspicion, and carry the conversation in a hidden location. In order not to upset foreign-currency providers, policemen tend to avoid stopping locals to check their papers when they are with a tourist, but as soon as they see the tourist and the local person part company, they invariably stop the latter for

⁵⁸ In two cases I quote academic experts who did not want to disclose their identity, I used abbreviations in those cases.

questioning.

One of the unfavourable points of my fieldwork was an incident that took place in July 1998. I was having a conversation with a gay informant, introduced to me by another informant, at the outside terrace café of the Hotel Inglaterra in central Havana, and noticed that he was slightly nervous and uncomfortable about sitting outside, but thought this was due to his still being “in the closet” and embarrassed about being seen in male company. After we had finished our conversation my informant set off up the street and I went back to the lobby. I later found out that once he had left the hotel area and I had been out of sight, he was stopped by two policemen who spotted us having a conversation and asked for his ID. They found out he was an off-duty police officer from Santiago de Cuba. At that time high-ranking police officers were forbidden from having social contact with foreigners, even when off-duty. He was arrested and later dismissed from his job. Since that incident, I was keen on taking exceptional care not to put my informants in any kind of trouble or risk.

Payments to informants is another ethical issue many researchers come across, especially in poor countries such as Cuba, that needs to be discussed and disclosed. I did pay to some of my informants, especially those with whom I conducted long private conversations in private places, but never directly. Payment involved buying dinner, paying for *fiesta* admission, and/or for taxis from/back home to/from the meeting place, a sum of between 5 to 15 USD/CUC. In one case I was even asked to “help” a well-known Cuban official and academic source (whose name I will not mention for privacy reasons) with a sum of 40 USD “to take the train back home to the province” because our conversation had taken longer than expected and he had missed his ride. It is important to emphasise that such dinner invitations and “payments”(known, in local discourse as *ayuda*, help), are not unusual and quite expected in all tourist-local relations in Special Period Cuba.

Another important ethical issue is the researcher’s personal involvement with informants during fieldwork, beyond simple empathy. In Havana in particular, a clinical stance or apparent standoffishness can be misconstrued as indifference, and be perceived by some as a personal slight, or even cause offence, thereby obstructing further communication. Hence, personal involvement, including that of an erotic nature, can at

times be a natural development between the researcher and the informant, and establishes an intimacy that fosters the kind of trust that is mutually beneficial at a personal level, and also furthers the research itself. Sexual contact between researcher and research subjects was once considered taboo, and celibacy was encouraged in the field, both for ethical reasons and to protect the researcher's "identity maintenance" (Dubisch 1995:35). Malinowski, for example, was a great advocate of celibacy in the field. But contemporary researchers contest this taboo, and some even pinpoint the academic benefits of sexual interaction in the field (Caplan 1993:23, Kulick 1995:23, Dubisch 1995:31).

Ralph Bolton claims that "sex is the most prominent and symbolically significant domain in gay culture. Same-sex erotic desire is what undergirds gay identity and community" (1995:142). He therefore advocates that sexual relations in the field "may lead to wisdom through a reduction in the hypocrisy and ignorance surrounding one of the most important domains of human life and pleasure and ... may produce greater knowledge through a reduction in the imaginary and artificial barriers of otherness which are sustained by rules of sexual exclusion" (1995:160).

When researchers admit to erotic subjectivity and activity in the field, it reflects on the sincerity, openness, and transparency of their work. Celibacy may be self imposed, but how can one control thoughts and attractions, and for what purpose?

When it comes to candour and transparency, Bolton wrote about the "double standard" of past ethnographical approaches:

I can clearly recall the recommendation that the ethnographer keep two sets of notes, one field notes proper which contain observations, interviews, and so forth, and two, a diary in which one records one's thoughts and experiences. I have never been able to follow that advice. ... What I am seeing, feeling, hearing, and thinking all affect how I, as the data-processing instrument, interpret the world I'm experiencing. (1995:148)

Like Bolton, I used in my fieldwork a single "notebook" that included my physical, cognitive and emotional accounts, and strongly believe that this approach is the key to a more sincere and profound research. As for emotional involvement with informants, this cannot (and should not) be avoided, and indeed the closeness I have shared with some of my informants has enriched my understanding, without otherwise affecting the handling of the data gathered for this research.

Chapter 5

Special Period Havana: The musicscape, the ethnoscape, and the homoscape

Introduction

This chapter sets the physical and conceptual background of Special Period Havana and its gay scene, as well as the locale and the time frame in which the research takes place. The question raised here is what is unique about Havana during the Special Period, in which ways it resembles and differs from other metropolitan areas in which postmodern gay scenes evolved, and what role music plays in defining it. There are two main axes on which the investigated scene evolves: geographical (Havana) and temporal (the Special Period). This chapter describes the three "-scapes" which flow along these axes, and whose meeting point creates the scene investigated. The "-scapes" include the following: the city's everchanging musical soundtrack--its musicscape; the unique demographic blend of locals, internal migrants and tourists, and the way they interact, which characterises its ethnoscape; and, the special character and evolution of its gay scene, the "homoscape".

The city's soundscape and its musicscape

There are a few cities in the world which are automatically associated with music. Liverpool is the Beatles, New Orleans is Jazz, Rio is Samba, and Havana is anything from "Buena Vista Social Club"-style bolero, rumba and *son*, to the more aggressive Special Period sounds of *timba*, *rap cubano* and *reggaetón*. Music is the blood running in the veins of the city, and the main ingredient of its soundscape.

Abigail Wood (2011) argues that "listening to--rather than looking at, or writing about--the city might help us think about this complicated, conflicted, enticing space in new and productive ways. Sound offers a means to look at how a city is experienced, as a physical, sensory environment."). Special Period Havana's daytime soundscape varies from one part of town to another. In Central and Old Havana, where most of my daytime fieldwork took place (see the area encircled in the map in Fig. 4.2 and the "gay area" in Fig. 4.3), it includes the sound of noisy old cars, bicycle horns, the endless chatter, and the UNESCO-sponsored renovation work in the old city), much music – from *son* bands playing in cafés, bars and street corners; bolero, *timba*, and (since 2000) *reggaetón* played on sound systems erupting from open windows and the boots of cars; muffled drumming sounds coming from homes where *santería* ceremonies take place, and louder drumming in the streets around where troutist rumba (Afro-Cuban folkloric dances) events take place, like Callejón de Hamel and El Palenque. At nighttime, the rich live music scene goes "indoors" to hotel bars, venues and clubs, many of which are out of reach to ordinary *habaneros* (without being escorted by a tourist), who have to resort to endless speeches by Fidel Castro on state television, or to their own cassette and music collection, or, in special occasions, to private *fiestas* or *bembés and toqués* in honour of the *orishas*.⁵⁹

Havana's soundscape was not only a constant backdrop to my fieldwork, but in many cases a vital source of information and of clues leading to an area of investigation (such as the bolero emerging from Aurelio's window, or the sound of muffled ritual drumming coming from an alley in old Havana which led me to a *santería* ceremony). Those "soundmarks"⁶⁰ were among my first clues and door-openers into the musical spaces as will be described in the following chapters.

Along with the actual acoustic soundscape of a city, there is an "imaginary" soundscape which has to do more with the imagined identity of the city, and is "not only an acoustic entity but an identity issue that highlights the discourse of place and

⁵⁹ musical ceremonies in honour of the Afro-Cuban religions' deities (see Chapter 9)

⁶⁰ Schafer defines a "soundmark" (deriving from "landmark", i.e. a sound unique to an area/scene) as one of the three main components of a soundscape, together with the repetitive, not-always-consciously-heard "keynote sounds", and the consciously-listened-to "sound signals" (Schafer 1997 [1994] :9,10). "Once a soundmark has been identified, it deserves to be protected, for soundmarks make the acoustic life of a community unique". (ibid.:10)

authenticity” (Sarah Cohen, about “the Liverpool Sound”, 1994:117). Its construction is “revealed as a political strategy, a resource through which relations of power at local, regional, national, and international levels can be addressed” (ibid.). In the case of Havana, a typical “imaginary” soundscape since 1997 comes from the Buena Vista Social Club album (1997) and film (1999)⁶¹ which brought many tourists to the island, and became a major aspect of the “imagined community” created by local gays for the benefit of the tourists. As Baker puts it “many young *habaneros* are well aware of the images of their country that are being promoted to tourists: they have a strong sense of living in “an imagined community for others (Sissons, quoted in Foster 1999, 268)” (2006:236). In the gay *ambiente* this sense of living in “an imagined community” gets a special meaning and an extra layer, as the “gay community” in Havana is also, in a sense, “an imagined community.”

Tourism, as will be discussed in the next chapter, has affected both the real and the imaginary sounds of central and old Havana. There is a distinctive acoustic and social difference between the soundscape of Havana as viewed/imagined by foreigners and foreign media, and as nurtured by the tourist agencies, and the music locals mostly associated with the city during my research period. The latter is rather rhythmic and aggressive--*timba*, *reggaetón* (since 2000) and *rap cubano*, or Cuban hip-hop, whereas the former is salsa, bolero and BVSC-style *son*. While Compay Segundo’s “Chan Chan” and Carlos Puebla’s “Hasta Siempre Comandante” (a 1965 song praising Ché Guevara), are heard in Havana’s streets from every hotel terrace and restaurant *son* band for the benefit of the tourists, the sound in the *fiestas* that locals go to is very different.

As for the musicscape of the gay *ambiente*, one of the first questions I am asked when presenting my work is “is there music which is exclusive to Havana’s gay scene? ” It is important to emphasise that the repertoire is not in any way unique or exclusive to the *ambiente*, but what is unique is the context and the way it is appropriated to create a bounded space, described in the following chapters.

According to Wood (2011), “understanding” a city through its soundscape demands, an intuitive approach. That is, “[s]ound, rendered in space, allows a link between

⁶¹ The Buena Vista Social Club phenomenon will be discussed in this thesis on several occasions relating to the different spaces. See more about “The Buena Vista Social Club syndrome” in Appendix VI.

structural elements of conflict into emotional, embodied, shared experience. It evokes an aesthetic-poetic space where logical, unidirectional verbal description needs to be transgressed in favour of intuitive understanding, the grasping of analogies and metaphors that transgress cultural boundaries" (ibid.). Transgressing logical and verbal descriptions and cultural boundaries, and "intuitive understanding" was essential for the decoding and deciphering work needed in this investigation, especially as it concerns a clandestine scene created and populated by marginalised and oppressed individuals whose communication/interaction system was historically based on codes and double meanings, as described in Sierra Madero's work about homosexuality in 19th century Havana (2002, 2004). In this work I show how this is expressed in music. The challenge is of course to put this "intuitive understanding" into a written analytical context.

The ethnoscape

There are different ways to view and categorise Special Period Havana's demographic texture. Most researchers refer to race/colour. I, however, chose to focus on three main transition-based groups which affected social and cultural interaction both in the city in general during the research period and, more-specifically, in its gay *ambiente*: locals (*habaneros*), internal migrants, mostly from the oriental provinces (*orientales*, or *palestinos*⁶²), and tourists (*extranjeros*⁶³). These new "classes," in an ideologically classless society, divide the city's population more than any "traditional" distinctions such as race/colour, religion, education or gender, in terms of economic resources, accessibility, and vulnerability to police harassment.

While race/colour⁶⁴ is one of the main focuses in works about Cuban music in the

⁶² The term *palestinos* (Palestinians) is used in Cuban slang to describe people migrating to Havana, especially from the eastern provinces, as if they were refugees. In Cuban street discourse it also has a racist and derogatory meaning: stupid, backward, "peasant". Source: <http://www.havana-guide.com/learn-spanish.html> (accessed 29.5.2010).

⁶³ *Extranjeros* means strangers, foreigners, street discourse for tourists (used more than '*turistas*'), taken from the official discourse to foreign visitors during the Soviet era, who were mostly USSR workers or visitors.

⁶⁴ I use the pairing race/colour as Cuban discourse looks at "skin colour" (*color de piel*) rather than "race", with a multiplicity of colour distinctions used in street discourse in the range between white and black, *mulato* being the most common one (unlike the US dichotomy).

Special Period (Perna 2005, Baker 2006, Fernandes 2006), and an in-depth research of race/colour social issues in Havana's gay *ambiente* pre-and-post the 1990s is in place, based on my observations, interviews and PersComs, it is less relevant to this particular investigation. "We are first gay and only then black or mulato" told me Yankiel, a 25-years-old black student (PersCom 2000), a view I heard quite often from the majority of my informants. Saying that, in specific chapters looking at scenes or genres that where colour/race is of relevance (in subjects such as *santería* religion, police harassment, and *jineterismo*), it will be mentioned and discussed.

Internal migration

Internal migration to Havana has been on the rise constantly since the early 1990s due to the financial crisis and Cubans coming to the capital in search for work, despite the authorities' measures to control migration from other parts of the island.⁶⁵ Unofficial press figures talk about migrants being 20% of the city's population, and responsible for 74% of the city's growth during 1989 to 1993.⁶⁶ Migrants from the provinces require an official permit to reside to Havana, and since these permits are rare, and not easy to acquire, most migrants are actually illegal (thus undocumented), which complicates their situation even more .

In the case of gays, migration from the provinces to Havana is not only a financial move, but driven by the hope of finding a certain sense of freedom to live according to their sexual orientation, thus escaping from the hometown's "closet". In his essay titled "*su casa es mi casa*," dealing with Latin House, sexuality and place among gay Latinos in New York, Stephen Amico discusses the concept of "hometown" in the context of gay migration, and argues that the relations of a gay person to his hometown or province is ambivalent in most cases, and "often wrought with complications" (2006:132). The "hometown" for many gay migrants is in most cases "a site of both humiliations and

⁶⁵ As reflected in Los Van Van's early 1980s song "La Habana no aguanta mas" (Havana can't take any more [people]).

⁶⁶ Source: "*Havana Cuba: Migration During The Special Period*", by Lisa Reynolds Wolfe on March 1, 2011 <http://www.havanaproject.com/2011/03/havana-cuba-migration-during-the-special-period> [accessed 3.8.2011]

erasure, of anathemization and contumely, of an internally perceived or externally proscribed inability to become part of the social fabric” (ibid.). Migrants from Cuba’s provinces dominate the *ambiente*, many of them illegally residing in Havana, in search of sex, money, work, entertainment, relative freedom to express their sexuality, self-realisation, and so called “gay identity” – not necessarily in this order.

Tourists/extranjeros

Tourism as a subject for anthropological research started gaining momentum in the 1960s (Nuñez 1963), was recognised as a significant line of ethnographic inquiry in the 1970s (Smith 1977), and eventually became a major theme in contemporary anthropology (Nash 1981, Graburn 1983, Urry 1990, Nash and Valene 1991, Selwyn 1994, Nash 1995, Selwyn 1996, Burns 1999, Crick 1989, Dann 1999, Errington 1989, Gmelch 2004, Scott and Selwyn, 2010). In the context of this work, tourists are a vital part of the subject group investigated and the interactions within this group, and play a major role in maintaining and motivating (both economically and psychologically) the *ambiente*.

The change in the Cuban government’s policy regarding tourism from discouragement to active encouragement, as described in the introduction chapter, has resulted in a steep increase in tourism to the island which, during my research period, has substantially altered the city’s ethnoscape and the *ambiente*. Baker describes the role of tourists in the life of young *habaneros* during the Special Period:

As most young Cubans have not left the island, they are often keen to make cross-cultural contacts; but also, since the economic crisis of the early 1990s, tourism has developed into a mainstay of both the formal and informal urban economies, and *habaneros* have become increasingly reliant on foreigners in order to overcome everyday hardships and, in some cases, to realize larger dreams (Baker 2006: 227).

Indeed, Havana, which since the 1959 revolution was isolated and officially xenophobic, became once again a "hot" tourist destination, and the image presented to tourists was "a distinctively postmodern ‘city of illusion’" (Baker 2006:243), repackaged as commodity for tourists, obsessed with history, and thriving on consumable "imagineering," including that of its inhabitants towards tourists (ibid.).

Tourists brought an aura of fun, abundance and globalism to the depressed city, changing not only its ethnoscape, but its feel. That is, "foreigners for the first time in

decades – roamed Havana’s streets, bringing a holiday feel to the inner city and befriending the impoverished urban dwellers. Often, these new relationships were sealed on the dancefloor“ (Hernandez-Reguant 2004 :31).

Music became not only one of the city’s major tourist attractions, but one of the major interfaces for tourist/local relationships. A bilateral relationship between tourism and music already existed in Havana in the pre-revolution era and has been re-established in the Special Period, especially since the Buena Vista Social Club phenomenon in 1997 (Perna 2005a:240-258). Tourists in Havana look for and consume music as one of the country’s main resources and attractions. At the same time, the music scene in Special Period Havana requires capital from tourism to finance it. Most venues and clubs for music are accessible only to U.S. dollar or CUC spenders. Furthermore, most venues have a door policy barring unaccompanied locals from entry (Baker 2006:221). Tourists are therefore the “bread and butter” of the live music scene in Special Period Havana, and paradoxically play a major role in allowing their local *amigos* to enjoy their own musical cultures.

Tourism and the way it was handled by the authorities also created a new class of inequality in a society which hailed equality as its prime motto. This was "particularly contentious in socialist Cuba, for the core ideology of equality has been undermined in a public and visible manner" (ibid.:241). Until 2008, and throughout my research period, Cubans were not allowed to enter hotel rooms, and were constantly harassed, their documents checked if caught hanging around hotel areas or seen in the company of tourists. This developed a feeling of local resentment towards what was locally known as “tourist apartheid.”

In spite of the attempt of the authorities to segregate the tourists and minimise “unofficial” contact between tourists and locals, especially during the first years of my research period, locals were craving for contact and tourists became a “hot commodity” in the streets of Havana, spotted by youngsters, approached, and harassed or charmed by them. The increase in tourism also brought an increase in sex-work, in a unique Cuban way called *jineterismo*.

Jineterismo and “music jineterismo”

He [Fidel] says there is no prostitution in Cuba. So maybe we don’t have *prostitutas* but we have our local speciality--jineteras and pingueros⁶⁷ ... (Pico, 42, PersCom 2003)

Already in 1962, Castro claimed that the campaign against prostitution was bearing fruit and prostitution was disappearing.⁶⁸ In 1971 he confirmed that prostitution was Cuba was eradicated,⁶⁹ a claim he repeated in many following speeches. In 1992, he admitted that there are “*jineteras*” (using this term, rather than “prostitutes”) but added that “they are strictly voluntary ones.”⁷⁰ Indeed, even Fidel could not avoid the fact that sex work returned to Havana in a major way during the Special Period, however with different nuances. *Jineteras* and *jineteros* are a significant force (both in quantity and in perception) in Havana during the Special Period, and are the subject of many timba songs of the 1990s (Perna 2005a:192-217). The literal meaning of *jinetera* (female) or *jinetero* (male), is a horseback rider, the analogy being that of “riding the tourist” (in both economical and sexual terms), or figuratively “taking him/her for a ride.” However, as Fernandez rightly indicates, which of the two persons concerned is the one being ridden--and under what terms--is a complex issue (Fernandez 1999:81). While the female version *jinetera* has a clear sexual connotation, the masculine version *jinetero* is used to indicate a basic hustler, not necessarily one selling his body for sex, but someone hustling in general--for instance, selling stolen goods, or fake cigars and rum, or posing as a private tour guide or offering tourists a “good time” in exchange for some financial reward (Sierra Madero interview 2006).

In the *ambiente*’s discourse the term *jinetero* is clearly used to indicate a “sexual hustler”, a guy who is socialising or having sex with gay tourists for financial benefit. *Jinetero* is a rather subtle term, unlike *pinguero*, indicating someone who works with his *pinga* (penis, in Cuban slang), which is a less roundabout word for a male prostitute. On the basis of many conversations with tourists, *jineteros*, *pingueros* – and their families – I have opted to differentiate between *pingueros* and sexual *jineteros* according to their personal attitude, and to how they project themselves in their interaction with the tourist, customer, or *amigo*

⁶⁷ Street-discourse terms for hustlers and sex-workers, which will be explained later in this chapter.

⁶⁸ source: <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1962/19620811.html> (accessed 1.10.2010).

⁶⁹ source: <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1971/19711117.html> (accessed 1.10.2010)

⁷⁰ source: <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1992/19920404.html> (accessed 1.10.2010)

(friend) – as they usually call him. Unlike *pingueros*, who state their price in advance, *jineteros* do not ask for money directly, but rather will accept *regalos* (gifts) and *ayuda* (help); furthermore, they socialise with the tourists, and instead of just having sex, they go out with them to restaurants, *fiestas*, and music venues. Another aspect that makes *jinetersimo* essentially different to prostitution is its “long-term” aspirations, as “[b]eyond short-lived sexual transactions, seducing a tourist could be more than a matter of instant gratification...it increasingly [leads] to a relationship culminating in marriage [in some cases I know of same-sex marriages] and migration abroad” (Hernandez-Regouant 2004:6).

Music plays a crucial role in the interaction and relationships between *jineteros* and *extranjeros*. It serves as a backdrop for interchange, and on many occasions, is the catalyst for these romance/sex-work activities and related “negotiations”. The bilateral relationship between music and sex-work – whereby music provides a “seedbed” for the sex-work activity, and sex-work in turn contributes to the music-making system – has a long history in Havana, and throughout the Latin world (Sublette 2004:295).⁷¹ In the early twentieth century, Havana was full of brothels that were also “hubs of communication” and “incubators for music” (ibid.). Similarly, the flourishing sex-work activity in Special Period Havana has been equally as important for the music scene, especially the music venues such as the Casa de la Música and the hotel ballrooms and cabarets, which are mostly frequented by eager, cash-wielding tourists and their willing counterparts, in many cases *jineteras* and *jineteros*.

In 2003, I conducted one of my “mini surveys” on the *ambiente*⁷², when twenty-five gay tourists who had had “holiday romances” with locals (some of whom were *jineteros* according to their own testimony or that of others) were asked what it was that they most liked about their Cuban “lover”. Twenty-one (84%) included music in their reply, telling me how much they had enjoyed watching their lovers dance, sing, and/or listen to music. The conclusion was that music played an important role in their encounters. (mini survey

⁷¹ About tourism, commercial sex and eroticism, see: Bowman 1989, Dahles and Bras 1999, Bernstein 2001, Andrews and Selwyn 2007.

⁷² See Chapter 3 about “mini surveys” as a tool in my methodology.

2003).⁷³

The many *jineteros* I spoke with are fully aware of the power of Cuban music and dance. In another mini survey in the same year, I asked twenty self-declared *jineteros* what they believed the tourists (*extranjeros*) were mostly attracted to in them. Seventeen (85%) mentioned “the way I dance” in their answers. In reply to the query about where they picked up tourists, the second most popular answer after the Malecón (18 out of 20, 90%), was the *fiestas* (16 out of 20, 80%), and eleven out of the sixteen (69%) who gave this answer willingly said that the first eye-contact usually took place when they danced (mini survey 2003).

While visiting dozens of music venues and *fiestas*, I observed how dance movements are exploited by *jineteros* for sexually teasing and as a means of seduction, and have noticed a typical behaviour pattern: the *jinetero* notices a tourist staring at him or even at some other guy; he then gets up and starts dancing, trying to draw the tourist’s attention; the tourist looks at the dancer, smiles are exchanged, and the *jinetero* leaves the dance-floor and approaches the tourist. Although one can still meet and befriend a “genuine” Cuban (i.e., a Cuban who is not a *jinetero*) in *fiestas* and in music venues, most of those who come on their own, and can afford to pay the entry fee, and interact with tourists in these venues, are *jineteros*. As Moore observes: “It has become increasingly difficult as a foreigner to establish normal, relaxed personal relations with Cubans in the places that most encounter them” (2006:231)

Although music is widely employed by *jineteros* as a seduction tool, the pleasure derived from music in the *jinetero-extranjero* relationship is in many cases eminently mutual. Many of the tourists I interviewed stated that it was their Cuban lovers who had dragged them to music venues of their own choice, mostly *fiestas*. They expressed their delight in watching their Cuban lovers enjoying the music even if they themselves did not. Likewise, *music* was the first answer given by fourteen out of twenty (70%) self-declared *jineteros* I asked about what they enjoyed most regarding the time they spent

⁷³ When I asked them more specifically to mark four options in answer to what they found most sexy about their Cuban lover, the answers ran as follows: 1. his face and or/eyes (23); 2. his body, or certain parts of his body (21 responded positively); 3. the way he dances (20); 4. his smile (12); 5. the way he made love/sex (12); 6. the way he talked (7); 7. other aspects (5). In this survey, 25 informants were giving 4 answers each, making 100 answers in total. However it is important to note that the maximum score any answer can get is 25 (i.e., all informants marked it). The answer “the way he dances” was the third most popular, equivalent to 80% (20 out of 25), well above sex (48%). [mini survey 2003]

with the tourist (mini survey 2003). Dayron, a *jinetero* who took part in this survey reiterated this when I met him 4 years later:

I like to go with James to restaurants or bars, but I mostly enjoy going with him to the Macumba [big live music venue] or even the Casa de la Música. I agree, maybe the sex for me is not so important as it is for him, but believe me when he takes me to dance and hear music, it is like sex for me. I enjoy music and dance like I enjoy sex, it turns me on. (Dayron, 22, PersCom 2007).

Photos: Favoured live music and “music *jineterismo*” venues

Photo 5.1 (top) *Timba* show at Casa de la Música (2003)

Photo 5.2 (bottom) *Reggaetón* show at Macumba (2007) [Photos: Moshe Morad]



The "homoscape": Havana's gay life in the 1990s -- from *maricón* to "gay".

We are not *maricones* anymore, we are "gays" now. What's the difference? I don't know how to explain it, but it feels different, we feel part of the world, we feel international... (Miguel, 44, PersCom 1999)

Gay identity in the Cuban context is a complex concept. It differs from "gay identity" in Eurocentric societies, which does not only mean practising homosexuality, but being part of a community, having access to gay lifestyle, art, media, and politics. The *ambiente* in Havana provides a certain frame and lifestyle for gays as will be described in this thesis, but it is far from being a Eurocentric-style gay scene, as such. I claim it is a mistake to examine Havana's gay *ambiente* from a Eurocentric perspective, not only because of the restrictions imposed by the regime and its clandestine nature, but also due to the different conceptualisation of homosexuality in Cuban society.

Before looking at the differences in "gay identity", we need then to understand the differences in the understanding of "homosexuality". Cuban homosexuality is not a "primitive" form of homosexuality, nor a "restricted" one, as some US queer activists claim,⁷⁴ but rather a different brand of homosexuality. Cuban homosexuality is a transcultural hybrid of indigenous and global concepts about sexuality and gender, based on behaviour, sexual preferences, sexual practices, old and new traditions, "revolutionary" ideas, tourism and outside influences. Unlike the relatively clear Eurocentric perception of homosexuality as the tendency of a person to be sexually attracted to his own sex, throughout history and even within the timeframe of this research, Cubans have different perceptions of homosexuality, and different stigmas attached to them, based on the sexual role rather than the choice of partner. Masculine active homosexuals ("penetrators") are not stigmatised in the way sexually passive ("penetrated") homosexual men are, who, in the Latino understanding, take the role of women both in their social behaviour and in bed, and therefore deviate "from traditional male appearance and manners" (Lumsden 1996:29). This is why it is easier sometimes for Cubans to accept transvestites or transsexuals who are "men turned

⁷⁴ Strongman criticises heavily, and rightly so, Western gay scholars who "carelessly defer to such inefficient and dangerous models of cultural comparison without reflecting on the distorted evaluations that their privileged perspectives are prone to make", starting with "the indiscriminate impositions of such gender categories of 'gay' or 'lesbian' without questioning the culture-specific conditions that gave rise to them in the United States and their non-correspondence to local Latin American categories" (Strongman 2002:176–178).

into women” (and therefore abide to the clear male-female dichotomy), than to accept effeminate homosexual men who are “in between,” or masculine men who like to be sexually penetrated.

I have come across many terms and street-discourse expressions for various kinds of homosexual behaviour. The most common term – used both by homosexuals and heterosexuals in Cuba – is *maricón*, equivalent to “fag” or “faggot” in English. Initially used as a derogatory expression, also meaning “coward,” *maricón* was later appropriated by homosexuals as a way of calling themselves and each other. Other expressions derived from *maricón* include *marica*, *maricon*, *mariquita*, and *mariconsón*. While *maricón* denotes a passive (thus stigmatised) homosexual, the term *bugarrón* (bugger) indicates a virile *macho* man, who penetrates (anally or orally) *maricones*, either for pleasure or for financial gain. In “pre-gay” Cuba, *maricones* were looking for *buggarones* for sex and for relationships.⁷⁵ Another frequently used term is *loca* (literally, crazy woman, here meaning “screaming queen”). Other street-discourse expressions I encountered for passive/effeminate gay men include *pájaro* (bird), *pájara*, *loca de carroza*, *pargo*, *chern* (a type of fish), *pato* (duck), *patín* (roller-skate), and *patineta* (skateboard). Some older terms are *mariposa* (butterfly), *invertido* (inverted), *ganso*, *de ambiente* (of the *ambiente*), and *entendido* (understood, inconspicuous, a subtle “old-school” term⁷⁶). The abundance of terms is indicative of the various types of homosexuality in Cuba.

The opening of the island to tourism played an important role in changing the scene, introducing the term “gay” into the *ambiente*’s discourse and bringing in ideas of “gay identity,” as Lolo, a forty-two-year-old gay man who had been “on the scene” since he was sixteen told me:

Prior to the big opening to tourism, in the mid-1980s we already knew what was happening with gays in the U.S. We were listening to radio broadcasts from Miami, when these were not interrupted [by the Cuban authorities] and heard stories about gay couples, organizations, gay parades... Every time there was something about gays on the radio, whoever heard it hastened to inform his friends and the issue became the hot subject of our next meeting in someone’s house. So we kept each other well informed. Also when a friend from Miami would come, especially one of the Mariel *locas* we used to meet in someone’s house and hear from him stories about gay life in the US. Later when the tourists started coming looking for Cuban *pingas* [penises], they were telling us about gay life in their countries. So we were always well informed and dreamt about “gay Havana”. Already then [mid-1980s] we started among ourselves using more and more the term “gay” instead

⁷⁵ As described in the books of gay Cuban author Reinaldo Arenas

⁷⁶ This term even appears in pre-revolutionary Cuban literature, such as “El monte” (Cabrera 1954).

of *maricón*. It was like an “upgrade”. It was funny because many of the heterosexuals did not know what it meant, so it was like a code word. I remember an incident in 1990, when a policeman came to us [a group of effeminate gays] and said to Tomasito, “Hey maricón, show me your papers!” Tomasito replied, like a mother to a child: “no soy un maricón, soy un gaaaaaaaay” [I am not a maricón, I am gay!]. The policeman was baffled. He didn’t know what he was talking about (Lolo, 42, PersCom 2001).

The evolution of gay identity in Special Period Havana was indeed linguistically signified by the switch from using the term “*maricón*”, to using the term “gay”. Whereas in the provinces *maricón* was still extensively used towards the end of my fieldwork (2007), both by gays and non-gays (not necessarily in a derogatory way), in Havana I have noted throughout my fieldwork periods a steep increase in using “gay” rather than *maricón*.

Gay identities historically evolved in urban spaces and are strongly connected to them and to what they provide, from socialising and entertainment opportunities to the possibility to hide and create a space-within-space, “known to the included” and unknown or even unnoticed by the “excluded”. This is exactly the case in Havana. “Cities seem to hold the promise of emancipation and freedom while skillfully mastering the whip of repression and domination” wrote Merrifield and Swyngedouw (1996:13-14) and quoted in Baker (2006:235) in connection with Havana. Special Period Havana, and especially the tourist areas in the Centro Habana, Vedado and Habana Vieja districts in which my fieldwork took place, as marked in Fig. 4.2 and 4.3, provided a certain “space” for its gay residents which is indeed ambivalent and paradoxical in cases--it offers a certain degree of freedom and acceptance, but at the same time means a tight control, repression and constant police surveillance and harassment.

When looking at behaviour of individuals in an urban social network Hannerz formulates a notion of “role-discriminatory attributes” which play a part in ordering an individual's participation in any of the social network domains he identifies in the city: household and kinship, provisioning, recreation, neighbouring, and traffic (1980:224).⁷⁷ The “role-discriminatory attributes” according to Hannerz are ethnicity, age, gender and sexuality, and “depending on how these are culturally defined, they may determine what roles an individual can take on, toward whom he may perform them, and in what way

⁷⁷ I would add another domain, spirituality, where religion and other “spiritual” alliances can be included. (Chapter 9)

they will be performed." (ibid.:245). In this case, using Hannerz's model of the role-discriminatory attribute is primarily sexuality, and the social network domain is primarily recreational in nature, but includes elements of kinship ("alternative family")⁷⁸ and provisioning (tourist-local relationship).

Within the different social linkages/networks in the city, different cultures (subcultures) develop: generational (youth cultures for example), ethnic, occupational, institutional/bureaucratic, financial, class-related, countercultures (hippies or anarchists for example) (ibid.:280). LGBTQ (sub)cultures were historically considered, and still are in some societies, deviant, together with criminal subcultures.⁷⁹ There are indeed social similarities in the evolution of urban deviant and LGBTQ cultures: "The crucial condition for the growth of new cultural forms... is the effective interaction of a number of individuals faced with a need to adapt to similar circumstances" (Cohen 1955:60-61). Secrecy and the psychological need to share a secret are other similarities, as is the need to socialise with similars in protected spaces. In Special Period Havana similar processes as described above--secrecy, the need to adapt, and "alternative kinship" systems--are key concepts in the *ambiente* and will be discussed throughout this thesis in relation to the different spaces. These will form some of the central themes extracted from this study.

Hannerz raises other theoretical ideas relating to minority groups in urban environments which are relevant to Havana's "homoscape" during the Special Period, such as the fact that the most significant contacts created in towns are between strangers

⁷⁸ See Chapter 9

⁷⁹ The association of homosexuals with immorality, deviance and crime has long historic, cultural, and political roots in Cuba. According to Sierra Madero, already in the 19th century effeminate Cuban homosexuals were associated with the "underworld" of prostitution and crime (2002, 2004, and interview 2006).

Paradoxically, by suppressing Catholicism, the Revolution made one very important contribution to bettering the life of homosexuals on the island "[The church's] ability to influence public attitudes on issues such as abortion, contraception, and homosexuality is insignificant" (Lumsden 1996:45). However, The Revolution brought its own kind of ideological homophobia. "Manhood" represented by the freedom fighter, and the *guajiro* (peasant) became the revolutionary ideal, whereas decadence was represented by prostitution and sexual deviance. Homosexuals became, according to official rethorics, the enemies of the Revolution. The revolutionary regime undertook to "correct" them, and in the late 1960s homosexuals were detained in the UMAP camps together with other "deviants". In 1980, many gays suffering from repression decided to seize the opportunity to leave for Miami in the Mariel boatlift, and the Cuban media coverage labeled them as *escoria* (scum), and associated them with criminals and drug addicts once again (Bejel 2001:108).

(1980:245). This is a major characteristic of gay spaces which evolved in order to provide meeting opportunities between gay strangers. The *ambiente* is indeed such social network. These social linkages are man made and created by choice, not inherited as kinship. As such they are also changeable and shifting by nature. This is not only a major characteristic of the *ambiente*, but reflects on city life as a whole: "Cities, unlike villages, and small towns, are plastic by nature. We mould them in our images: they, in their turn, shape us by the resistance they offer when we try to impose our own personal form on them" (Raban 1974:1,2).

Other urban modes of social existence mentioned by Hannerz are encapsulation and segregativity (1980:255): "[E]ncapsulation depends on keeping outside links weak and disclosing little about what goes on inside" (ibid.:257), thus maintaining and protecting the boundaries of the group. On a superficial level, the encapsulation of the *ambiente* with its clandestine *fiestas* is most likely out of fear from the police rather than an urge to encapsulate, but a certain degree of encapsulation is characteristic of most gay scenes, even in more tolerant societies. The *ambiente* offers a relatively open encapsulation as it allows "outsiders" and "new comers" to join in easily. Much of the socialising activity takes place outdoors, in the Malecón and La Rampa, in spite of the vigilant eyes of the police and the frequent police harassment. Segregativity, colloquially known as "leading a double life," is a mode which relates to many individuals within the *ambiente*, as in most "gay scenes" in other societies. A "segregated" individual "has two or more segments in his network which are kept well separated" (ibid.:258). Two of my main informants (Luís 43, 1999; Aleido 44, 2001) were active members of the communist party and as such they were "discreet" about their sexuality and their comrades at the party did not know about their homosexuality. On weekends, they used to openly hang around the Malecón and go to the *fiestas*.

Whiteley points out that the social gathering spaces which are elementary to the existence of ethnoscares have become "increasingly contested terrains" (2005:3). As a result of the increase in tourism, police harassment, *jineterismo*, and other factors described here, the *ambiente* has indeed become an increasingly contested terrain. Music plays an important role in this contestation and in the "marking out of cultural territory" (ibid.)

Towards the 1990s, two main developments occurred in Havana's homoscape: visibility and the evolution of a certain gay identity. With the help of tourism and foreign influence, and the increase in open discussions in the Cuban press and media about tolerance towards homosexuality, gay Cubans started feeling less intimidated by the authorities (but police harassment continued as will be described in the following pages). As a result, after nearly two decades of repression, they became once again a visible part of street-life in downtown Havana (Lumsden 1996:130). "It's unbelievable to see how gay life has changed. Gays are much more visible in the streets in the last ten years," commented Fernández Robaina, a gay activist and Cuban researcher at the Biblioteca Nacional in Havana (Interview 2003). Together with this return of visibility came the beginning of the formation of a gay identity, replacing old notions of Cuban homosexuality and homo-sociality, as described by Sierra Madero (2002, 2004, 2006). The increasing contact with tourists, foreign influences, and foreign media was a very important catalyst of this process. Lumsden explains that in Special Period Havana "More and more young gays are developing a sense of gay identity and consciousness ... They are becoming aware of the growing rights of gay males in other countries and of their own role in what has become an international social movement (1996:130, 131)

Another important factor leading to the evolution of gay identity in Havana is the fact that in spite of the restrictions on access to foreign media and the economic hardship, Cubans in general are well informed and updated with global changes and movements and are exposed to foreign news formally and informally (with the influx of tourism this became even easier). It is an educated population with "Eurocentric" middle-class expectations and aspirations, despite the lack of, and also limited access to, media, consumer goods and materials.

Since the early 1990s homosexuality and gay identity have also entered more and more into the arena of academic, artistic, and national debate, thus to some extent paving the way for the 2008 anti-homophobia campaign.

For many years there was repression, and the older and younger Gays of that period experienced the same thing. Because of the silent internal resistance to Gay repression, the vocal criticism of Cuban Gays abroad, and the economic crisis, among other issues, the policy against Gays began to change. I, like many other Gays, for many years could not attend the University of Havana. It's wonderful to see that now the University is more tolerant to Gay students. Gay literature and Gay writers are now being studied in the classroom and students can write their dissertations about them. Ten years ago, I wouldn't

have thought it possible. (Fernández Robaina, 2001)⁸⁰

However, this increasing academic and institutional tolerance did not translate to the actual streets, nor did it affect the police behaviour towards gay spaces, gathering-places, and meeting points, which throughout the 1990s suffered regularly from harassment, closures, and “clean-up operations” (see in Chapter 6 about the *redadas*).

Meanwhile, the early 1990s also witnessed a wave of external interest in Cuba’s gay scene, influenced both by the opening of the island to mass tourism, and by the development of queer theory, along with the publications of groundbreaking investigations about gay and queer lifestyles (Butler 1990 and 1991; Gevert, Greyson and Parmar 1993; Brett, Thomas and Wood 1994; Meyer 1994; Seidman 1996). The year 1996 saw the publication of Ian Lumsden’s *Machos, Maricones, and Gays*, the only book published to-date dedicated exclusively to homosexuality in Cuba; inevitably, the scene changed substantially in the years following the book’s publication.

A year to be remembered is 1994, one of the toughest years of the financial crisis, yet a milestone year in the history of gay life in Cuba. Many significant events took place in that year, which happened to be the year I first visited Cuba, and were the catalysts in my decision to embark on this research. A dialogue started between gay Cubans and foreign scholars, intellectuals, and queer activists. The government’s segregation policy and paranoia about external influences, in addition to the U.S., blockade interrupted this dialogue, but also made it more exciting and challenging. “There was a spirit of intellectual curiosity and excitement, fuelled by the crisis, to find answers to questions of our identity as Cubans and as individuals, outside the revolutionary paradigm”, comments Alberto, one of Cuba’s leading gay activists in the mid 1990s, now living in Florida (47, PersCom 2003).

In a gathering in 1994 in Parque Alemandres, a gay rights manifesto was presented, and a group called GLAC (Gay and Lesbian Association of Cuba) was formed. However, it was short lived and was soon replaced by another group with a rather less obvious name, GALEES (*Grupo de Acción por la Libertad de Expresión de la Elección Sexual*: Action Group for the Liberty of Expression of Sexual Choice), which soon faded away. A

⁸⁰ Source: www.blacklightonline.com/fernandezrob.htm (accessed 1.2.2002).

couple of months later, during the 1995 First of May parade in Havana, a delegation of a U.S. action group called “Queers for Cuba” joined by Cuban gays and lesbians carried a huge rainbow flag--which they claimed was the original flag from the Stonewall gay rights riots in New York (1969)--through the parade, without being stopped and without any interference from the authorities. The mass of onlookers cheered and joined the dance around their flag. The question is how many of the patrolling policemen knew the significance of the rainbow-coloured flag, and what Fidel Castro--who stood on the platform of honour--was thinking when the colourful delegation passed by.⁸¹ This event may have had a symbolic significance, but it was an isolated event which hardly had any impact on the life of Cuban gays.

What effectively brought Cuban homosexuality and gay identity out of the closet, at the same period, were two cultural products--a film and a song.

“Fresa y chocolate”

Widely popular also outside Cuba, the film “Fresa y chocolate” (Strawberry and chocolate), directed by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío, describes a certain relationship between David, a communist university student and Diego, an openly gay artist, in Havana in 1979.

The film opened the December 1993 Havana Film festival, and by 1994 it had become by far the most popular film in Havana. In fact one of my earliest and most striking impressions of the city was the long queues outside the cinemas screening the film, in a time where you could hardly see any lights in the dark streets, there were no shops, bars, or clubs open, just people lining up in the dark to see “Fresa y chocolate”. Jorge Perugorria, the actor who played Diego, said in an interview to Birringer, “...although it may be the first Cuban feature that treats homosexuality openly and unflinchingly, *Fresa y chocolate* goes much further: by examining Cuban culture, incarnated in an out-of-closet queen, or *loca*, in the Cuban vernacular. (1995:62).

In the film, paradoxically, it was the character of Diego, the *loca*, the deviant, inside his colourful house full of artefacts and Cuban memorabilia, who cherished and

⁸¹ Sonja de Vriej, a member of the US delegation immortalised the scene in her documentary film *Gay Cuba* (1995). <http://www.qrd.org/qrd/world/americas/cuba/gay.may.day.in.havana-05.01.95> (accessed 25.5.2010).

preserved traditional Cuban values and heritage, and introduced young communist David, the young student, to traditional, pre-communist Cuba. Symbolically, the two characters represent different values which clash in post-revolution Cuban discourse. On the one hand David embodies the established discourse of revolutionary Marxist ideology aimed to eliminate the “old world” and create an egalitarian, atheist, and colour-blind society based on universal human values and communist ideas and aesthetics, with no race and gender differences, and on the other hand Diego represents the “deviant elements” in society (including homosexuals) who, by cherishing the “old world” Cuban aesthetics and values, preserve the pre-revolution Cuban heritage and artistic expressions, including bolero music and *santería* rituals, two of the “spaces” featured in this thesis.

“El pecado original” and gay themes in nueva trova

Nueva trova (New Song) is the name given to the singers-songwriters’ protest movement that emerged in the mid- to late 1960s in the wake of the Revolution. This movement was fostered by the Revolution’s values and the political and social climate in Cuba and Latin America at the time. The song was related to the *nueva canción* protest song movement emerging in Latin America. Originally started in a *trovador* style of a singer accompanying himself on guitar, in the 1990s the concept evolved into a singer-songwriter movement (also called *novísima trova*) employing different genres such as rock, jazz, and hip-hop and featuring critical lyrics dealing with social issues, injustice, sexism, racism, and politics (Fairley 2000b, Moore 2006:135-169). It is not surprising, therefore, that from within this genre came the firsts songs dealing openly with gay rights.

At a performance in the Karl Marx Theatre in 1994 one of Cuba’s most popular and most respected musicians, *nueva trova* star Pablo Milanés, sang a song titled “El pecado original” (The original sin) which deals with love between two men. This song openly denounced homophobia and became the closest thing in Cuba to a “gay liberation anthem”, providing an unexpected and much yearned-for musical-intellectual *space* for many Cuban gays.⁸²

⁸² Audio: Appendix III/2

El pecado original (Lyrics by Pablo Milanés)

*Dos almas
dos cuerpos
dos hombres que se aman
van a ser expulsados del paraíso
que les tocó vivir.
Ninguno de los dos es un guerrero
que premió sus victorias con mancebos.
Ninguno de los dos tiene riquezas
para calmar la ira de los jueces.
Ninguno de los dos es presidente.
Ninguno de los dos es un ministro.
Ninguno de los dos es un censor de sus
propios anhelos mutilados...
Y sienten que pueden en cada mañana
ver su árbol,
su parque,
su sol,
como tú y como yo...
que pueden desgarrarse sus entrañas
en la más dulce intimidad con el amor
así como por siempre hundo mi carne
desesperadamente en tu vientre
con amor también.
No somos Dios.
No nos equivoquemos otra vez.*

The Original Sin (Translation by Ian Lumsden. 1996:210)

Two souls
Two bodies
Two men who love each other
are going to be expelled from the paradise
in which they were destined to live.
Neither of them is a warrior
who celebrated his victories with young men.⁸³
Neither of them has riches
with which to placate the fury of his judges.
Neither of them is president.
Neither of them is a minister.
Neither of them is a censor of his own mutilated desires...
and each morning they can feel that they can
see their tree,
their park,

⁸³ Lumsden explains that “Mancebos” has no exact equivalent in English. It is a literary term on occasions associated with the ephebi of Ancient Greece.

their sun,
like you and I...
that they can surrender their hearts
in the most sweet intimacy of love
just as I always sink my flesh
desperately within your womb
also with love
We are not God
Let us not repeat the mistake.

In the wake of “El pecado original” in 1995, singer-songwriter Pedro Luís Ferrer followed with his song “Él tiene delirio de amar varones” (He is crazy⁸⁴ about loving men), condemning discrimination against gays, saying:

He is discriminated for being like that,
a man lucky with men...
in love with young guys...
And I ask myself why doesn't this happen
To all those *machistas* who treat their women like slaves...⁸⁵

In the same year, Carlos Varela, Cuba's most prominent rock singer-songwriter approached homosexuality and transsexuality directly in his song “Hombre de silicona” (Silicone man), telling the tragic story of a transsexual, and using the term "gay" for the first time in Cuban popular music lyrics:

This character injected a dose of silicone
his breasts began to grow.
He dreamt about sounding like Madonna
and having the legs of Cher.
He was a man, he was a man
but he had a woman's heart...
One night everything ended in his bedroom
when death kissed his lips like a gay man... (*la muerte le besó los labios como un gay*)⁸⁶

During the 1990s, claims Fairley, lyrics “acted as a barometer of Cuban everyday life, an essential way to find out what ordinary Cubans think about what is going on

⁸⁴ The word *delirio* in Cuban-Spanish street discourse can have different meanings: delirium, frenzy, hallucination, adoration.

⁸⁵ Lyrics: Pedro Luís Ferrer (my translation). Audio: Appendix III/3

⁸⁶ Lyrics by Carlos Varela (my translation). Audio: Appendix III/4

politically, economically and socially, particularly in the absence of any newspapers or popular press” (Fairley 2006:472, 2004:86).⁸⁷ Indeed, the songs quoted above are written by individual singers-songwriters known for their social agenda, but at the same time reflect a certain public mood among Havana’s new generation. Yet, such examples are rare, and no big Cuban stars since Milanés, Ferrer, and Varela in 1994-1995, have come up with strong anti-homophobic lyrics in Cuban popular music. Furthermore, this wave of pro-gay and anti-homophobia lyrics seems to be confined to 1994-1996 (most likely triggered by “El pecado original” and by “Fresa y chocolate”) with no significant follow-up in the following years, except the 2000 song “Lola” by the band “Moneda Dura” (Hard Currency), again about a transsexual.

No one knows what’s going on inside her body
 How this baby simply lives in an invention
 She injects silicone, shaves her legs and paints her eyes
 And when they call her ‘loca’, Lola goes on with her red lips.
 Lola comes walking. Look how she walks.⁸⁸

While these few texts showed empathy with aspects of being gay, and in spite of the genre’s great social importance, *nueva trova* has not constituted a popular genre or one of the main musical “spaces” in the male gay *ambiente* during the Special Period.⁸⁹ The importance and role of *nueva trova* in the evolution of gay identity in Cuba is therefore rather historic and conceptual. In addition to its “pro-gay moments” described above, *nueva trova* also challenged the masculinity of *música bailable* and the cliché

⁸⁷ While in this quotation Fairley was specifically referring to *timba* (see Chapter 6), this can be said about Cuban popular music in general, and especially about *nueva trova*.

⁸⁸ Lyrics by *Nassiry Lugo* (my translation). Audio: Appendix III/5

⁸⁹ *Nueva trova* and *novísima trova*, however, do provide some space for lesbian expression, reflected both in the song lyrics and in the open sexuality of many female *trovadoras* (such as Teresita, Miriam Ramos, Liuba Maria Hevia, Heidi Igualada, Yusa, Lázara, Rita Del Prado, and Marta Campos). Susan Thomas’s essay “Did nobody pass the girls the guitar? Queer appropriations in contemporary Cuban popular song” (2006) is dedicated to the subject. Thomas quotes a Cuban, Madrid-based male musician: “Las trovadoras siempre han sido una mafia lesbiana (Female singer-songwriters have always been a lesbian mafia)” (2006:127), but claims that this “Lesbian connection” is more apparent and accepted among Cubans in exile than on the island (2006:128). Still, the issue was many times raised in my conversations with musicians and *nueva trova* fans in Havana. Some even talked about a historic “lesbian thread” in the genre, starting with the legendary 1940s singer-songwriter Maria Teresa Vera. As for lyrics and song themes, contemporary *trovadores* and *trovadoras* seem to sing more, directly or indirectly, about woman-to-woman love than man-to-man’s, as Thomas demonstrates in various examples (Carlos Varela, Yusa, Heidi Igualada etc.). This, again, can be compared to the popularity of female folk and singer-snogwriters genre among Lesbians in the US/UK.

male/female binaries of *música bailable* and bolero by introducing “personal” songs about the fragile inner world and insecurities and, in a way, “queering” the male/female dichotomy of Cuban music.

Another very popular genre in Cuban music, somehow close and related to *nueva trova*, which I also looked at but came to the conclusion it does not constitute a “musial space” in the *ambiente* during the Special Period, is *filin* (from “feeling”). *Filin* is an intimate and romantic song style, a fusion of the Cuban *canción* (romantic song) tradition with strong influences from American jazz. It arose in the 1940s and became extremely popular in the 1950s. Prominent *nueva trova* artists, such as Pablo *Milanés* began their careers as interpreters of *filin* (Moore 2006:137,138). Musically *filin* is nuanced and characterised by modulations and chromaticism, and sophisticated arrangements influenced by anything from Jazz to Debussy’s impressionism, and lyrically *filin* themes are private and poetic (Orovio 2004:84).

To compare *nueva trova* and *filin*’ texts to those of bolero⁹⁰--in spite of the common “personal” themes, the former two are much more nuanced and “low key” and differ immensely from the over-dramatic bolero texts. It is that drama, power, passion, and Camp sensibility with its love of the exaggerated (Sontag 1964), which characterise the “musical spaces” identified and described in this thesis, from bolero to dance music, ballet, drag and *santería* music.⁹¹

Conclusion

This chapter lays the groundwork for the detailed ethnographic chapters to follow. I have described the first “enveloping spaces” in this thesis (circles 1 through 3 in the concentric circle model of relative privacy in Fig. 3.1): Havana, the *ambiente*, and the gay and tourists areas in Havana in which this research took place (as marked in Fig. 4.2

⁹¹ This can be compared to the relatively minor place of folk/troubadour-style singer/songwriters music in the male gay scene in the US and UK (in spite of its socially concerned and even “gay rights” texts such as Tom Robinson’s gay anthem “Glad to be Gay”), compared to dance music and “torch songs” (Middleton 2007).

and 4.3). I also described the actual and “imaginary” musicscapes, the ethnoscape and, more specifically, the “homoscape” in which the *ambiente* survives. The section concerning the “homoscape” brings a summary of developments, key events and cultural presentations of the gay *ambiente* in the years leading to, and during, the Special Period.

The chapter concluded with the introduction of “pro-gay” texts in *nueva trova*, and the description of two popular genres in Cuban music which, in spite of their “queer” aspects of resistance to Cuban *machismo* and hybrid nature, have not become significant “spaces” for identity, interaction and escapism in the gay *ambiente* during the Special Period. This leads us to the ethnographic part of this thesis, further into the inner circle, the next five chapters which will describe the musical spaces of the *ambiente*.

One *ambiente* place in which *nueva trova* and *filin*’ songs are heard is along the Malecón, where amateur *trovadores* hang around, play the guitar and sing to the crowd for a sip of rum. The gays enjoy the songs while looking around for friends or tourists they can share a taxi with to go to the *fiesta de diez pesos*...

Chapter 6

Fiestas de diez pesos, Part I: The scene, and queer appropriations of the music and dance

Without *fiestas* there is no gay life in Havana. *Fiestas* existed here all the time, in one way or another, more secretly or less, but they always did. This is also why in periods when they [the police] raid and close down many *fiestas* or try to “dry” us, the *ambiente* is in crisis, very difficult for all. The *fiestas* in the 1990s helped us become a real ‘gay scene,’ it helped us get more exposed to foreign [global] gay concepts, make more contact with tourists, get more organized and more of a scene, and become more open about our sexuality and identity. (Miguel, 45, PersCom 2000)

Introduction

Both dance music (*música bailable*) and homosexuality were deliberately marginalised by the Cuban regime during Fidel Castro’s reign under the pretext of being anti-social and anti-revolutionary.(Perna 2005a, Lumsden 1996)⁹² The *fiestas de diez pesos* phenomenon brought these two marginalised (but by no means marginal) spheres together, and became the primary space for gay interaction, providing a lifeline for the gay *ambiente* in the city with its unique circumstances during the Special Period. Havana does not have a “gay community” in the Eurocentric sense, but one can say the *fiestas de diez pesos* “function as supportive expressions of something *like* a gay community”. (Dyer 1995[1979]:414),

Having attended over thirty *fiestas* in the course of my fieldwork, I was in a position to observe the changes that took place during the research period. Changes in the ethnoscape of the *fiestas*, the behaviour of the party-goers, and the music genres played and danced. I verified my observations in numerous conversations carried out between

⁹² In both cases, during my research period, de-marginalisation campaigns were headed by strong political younger generation individuals closely connected to the leaders who strongly believed in their agendas and cared to encourage and legalise them. One such leader was culture minister Abel Prieto, who embraced popular youth music. The second was Dr Mariela Castro-Espín, head of CENESEX with her anti-homophobia and gay and transgender rights campaigns.

1995 and 2007 with DJs and party-goers, querying the former about the behaviour patterns observed and the music played in *fiestas*, and the latter about their "*fiesta* experience" and types of music they enjoyed dancing to. This data helped me identify links between behavioural patterns, shifts in musical taste, and the evolution of the gay scene in Havana. Two chapters are dedicated in this thesis to the *fiestas* phenomenon, the first (part I), primarily descriptive, and the second (part II) primarily analytical.

This chapter begins with an account of my first "*fiesta* experience" in 1995, and moves into a description of Havana's gay *fiesta* scene, the changes it went through during the research period, and the two main kinds of *fiestas* – "home" and "semi-public". These two kinds differ not only in size and ambience, but also in the local/global music ratio played at them. Up until 2000 (when the *reggaetón* craze took over Havana's dance-floors), approximately 70% of the music played at the home *fiestas* I attended was either Cuban or Latin American, and sung in Spanish, while the remaining 30% was Anglo-American dance music, mostly U.S.-originated. Conversely, in the big public *fiestas* there was a nearly 50/50 split between Cuban/Latino music and North American music.⁹³ As for the genres played in the two types, up until 2000, the home *fiestas* featured in general more local and softer salsa, while the big outdoor *fiestas* offered more global and more "aggressive" genres, mainly U.S. house and Cuban *timba*. This shift towards a more international repertoire in the big semi-public *fiestas*, reflects some of the "central themes" in this thesis which affected the *ambiente* in general: the increasing openness to foreign influences, the rising interest in *extranjeros* and their culture, and the growing desire to leave Cuba and become international. The shift also reflects the disillusion from Cuba and its values.

The two major local dance genres that emerged in Cuba since 1990 and featured strongly in the *fiestas* I attended were *timba*, in the earlier period of my research (1995–2000), and *reggaetón* in the later period (2000–2007). Hardcore *timba* was more common in the outdoor *fiestas* than in the smaller home ones. Since 2000 *reggaetón* has been ruling the dancefloors of both kinds of *fiestas*, eroding not only the share of *timba* and

⁹³ The special relationship between local music and global music in popular dance music club cultures, and the question it raises regarding place, space and identity has been discussed by several authors, mostly from a popular music studies perspective (Hollows and Milestone 1998:83-103).

salsa, but the quota of international music as well.

This chapter look into salsa, *timba*, *reggaetón*, and house, the four genres that dominated the *fiestas de diez pesos* during my research period, and examine their appeal and the special queer “twist” they acquired in their adaptation to gay audiences, and their role in creating a space for gay identity in Havana during the Special Period.⁹⁴

While house music and its predecessor, disco, are international and clearly associated with global gay culture, the other three “local” genres⁹⁵ are traditionally conceptualised as “heterosexual” and at the gay *fiestas* are appropriated and receive a queer twist, primarily through the queer appropriation of their dance-styles and their lyrics.

The three local genres will be reviewed by a chronological order of their emergence and popularity in the scene, concentrating on their dance styles (which, as will be shown, are influenced and imbibe from each other) and the way they have been queerified, appropriated and used as a gay space during the period. I will then look at essentially global gay house, its infiltration into the Havana gay *fiestas* scene, and its musical characteristics corresponding with an aesthetic gay Cuban sensibility, which can be found in other featured genres, including the religious music of *santería*.

My first *fiesta de diez pesos*.

Hanging out at the Malecón

On the first Friday evening of my fieldwork in Havana (December 1995), I made my way to the Malecón, the seafront esplanade. I was heading to the main gay gathering area

⁹⁴ When looking at the different genres of dance music I do not necessarily distinguish between the dance and the music itself, and do not investigate them separately in different sections. I believe they form one unity, and any kind of separated analysis would be artificial. Still, in the following sections relating to the different genres, I sometimes look at musical sound and style characteristics, and sometimes at dance/motor characteristics, as a unique feature of the whole, depending on their relevance to the subject.

⁹⁵ While salsa and *reggaetón* are pan-Latino, with local Cuban versions/ appropriations (*casino*, *salsa cubana* and *cubaton*) *timba* is 100% Cuban.

in the section where the Malecón meets Avenida 23.⁹⁶ Walking along the esplanade, I came to an unlit section, very crowded with mostly men leaning or sitting on top of the wall, some of them walking up and down, chatting, drinking rum from small bottles, and staring at the “new faces”. Every weekend, hundreds of gays and transvestites gather here, sitting on the Malecón wall and socialising under the scrutiny of police officers who usually take the pavement on the opposite side of the road, or in the dark corners close to the petrol station, the fountain, or along La Rampa. (See Fig. 6.1). I found a spot for myself in a corner on the wall to sit. I made myself comfortable to watch what was going on. This is going to be my main fieldwork location during the next twelve years--sitting, observing, listening, conversing, making new acquaintances, expanding my social network, and obtaining information.

The Malecón is the hub of the gay *ambiente* in Havana. From the early evening until the late hours, many of the city's gays loiter there if they cannot afford any other activity. Or, they start the evening there, fishing for information on the *fiestas*, and hoping to meet a friendly *extranjero* who will offer to pay for the taxi to take them to the *fiesta*. From there, individuals or groups make their way to the *fiestas*. When Havana's gays use the term “Malecón” they infuse it with a conceptual context well behind its physical location. “I am not a Malecón kind of guy,” or “I prefer the ballet to the Malecón” would mean I am a “non-scene,” more sophisticated guy. Notwithstanding, even the more “sophisticated” non-scene gays in Havana frequent the Malecón from time to time to hear what's new and to meet old friends. Sitting on the Malecón's wall facing the road, a person is bound to be approached by someone and start a conversation. Sometimes young men with guitars hang around, singing and playing *nueva trova* and *filin* songs, and taking requests, usually for a sip of rum from someone's bottle or, if from tourists, a beer or an ice cream. It is a kind of urban space that is “produced by and simultaneously producing social relations” (Colombijn 2007:258). This is the main meeting and hang-out spot for Havana's gays, essential for the maintenance of the *ambiente* due to the absence of dedicated gay bars, cafes, and clubs. It also provides a

⁹⁶ Although the Malecón runs all the way from Havana Harbour to Rio Almandares, in the gay discourse when people talk about the “Malecón” they means the gay section in the corner with Avenida 23/La Rampa (as marked in Photos 4.1 & 4.2). From now on whenever I use Malecón it will be in this sense, unless otherwise mentioned.

liminal space (physically and symbolically in the dark) for the formation of a gay identity in Havana.

The weekend action usually starts in the Malecón itself, on the wall, and continues along Avenida 23, when many gays walk up and down what is known as La Rampa (the slope), the section on Avenida 23 between the Malecón and Calle L, which ends at the Yara cinema, opposite the Habana Libre hotel. The Yara is a gathering point for the gay *fiestas*. Some unofficial gay meeting bars along Avenida 23 which also became my frequent hangouts are Bim Bom ice-cream parlour, the unnamed bar at Avenida 23 y P, and La Arcada at Avenida 23 y M⁹⁷ (see Fig.4.3).




Towards 11pm the crowd in the Malecón begins to thin down, many start moving up on Avenida 23 towards the Yara cinema to take taxis to the *fiesta*. Outside the Yara, people try to find out where the *fiesta* is happening tonight. There is a small debate going on between two locations. “The taxi drivers will know”, says one in the crowd.

Indeed, as I later found out, taxi drivers (and some private drivers) waiting outside the Yara are the main source of information to where the *fiestas* are due to take place. Often it is in a secret location, so there is no address as such. Only the taxi drivers know how to get there.

⁹⁷ Interestingly, *La Rampa* was the heart of swinging Havana in the 1950s, with its casinos, night-clubs and ritzy hotels, whereas nowadays it is Havana’s main gay cruising area. Ironically, back in the 1930s the nearby Hotel Nacional (still dominating the area and can be seen when sitting along the Malecón’s gay section) was marketed to American tourists with slogans such as “Swing to sunshine in Gay Havana” years before the term gay became a homosexual byword. See a vintage advert of Hotel Nacional in Appendix IX

Fig. 6.1 Police observation points in the “gay” area



-  Gay gathering areas along the Malecón and near Bim Bom ice-cream parlour
-  Gay Cruising area, walking up and down along La Rampa/Avenida 23
-  Police observation points

The way to the fiesta

After a few minutes of “looking lost” one of the taxi drivers approached me asked me in a low voice “to the *fiesta*?” I nodded and was led to a local taxi parked a few yards away out of sight (local taxis were not supposed to take tourists). There were already three Cuban guys in the cab waiting for more passengers to share the fee or preferably for a tourist to join them and pay for the entire ride. I offered to pay the \$10 fee, and two of them immediately tried to fix me up with the third guy for the evening. I had to decline the offer politely by saying I was expecting to meet some friends at the *fiesta*, and started asking them questions, adding them to my pool of “*fiesta*” informants.⁹⁸ The drive, or

⁹⁸ One of them proved to be a reliable source of information, and eventually became one of my main informants in my 1997-2000 fieldwork period.

rather “pilgrimage,” to the *fiesta*, an experience which was repeated every time I took a taxi from the Yara to a *fiesta*, is part of the experience.

Hallows and Milestone described a similar phenomenon of “pilgrimage” to a far-away location for leisure/freedom/escapism in connection to the Northern soul scene in the UK in the 1960s and 1970s (1998:83-103). They compared the phenomenon the “liminal ‘time out’” offered by daytrips or holidays of working class families to resort towns in Britain (Shields 1991:85), “drawing on the place-image of seaside resorts as sites of ‘liminality’” (Hallows and Milestone 1998:94). Closer to the *fiestas* scene, this phenomenon is visible in the “pilgrimages” to secret, out-of-town, late-1980s electronic dance music rave parties and even to “party havens” such as Ibiza. Melechi talks about the concept of “pilgrimage” as part of the postmodern ritual associated with dance parties and talks about British revelers in Ibiza where “one comes to hide from the spectre of a former self” (1993:32).

In the car there is already a certain feeling of liminality, a “neither-here-neither-there,” a safe space “in-between,” freedom to behave “gay”, and excitement. The passengers start talking freely and in a louder voice than they would on the street, using Camp mannerisms, even touching and kissing.

Finally there

After a twenty-minute drive we came to a dark road and stopped before a closed gate. The driver flashed his lights as an agreed signal to the guards to open the doors. The gate opened, we went in and joined a short queue leading to another gate. Familiar sounds welcomed me with the late 1980s gay anthem “It’s Raining Men” by the Weather Girls. I paid a smiling yet cautious young guy at the gate the entry fee of US\$2 and my cab-mates paid 10 pesos each.⁹⁹ We soon found ourselves in a large outdoor space

⁹⁹ In the early years of my fieldwork (1995-1998), it was still acceptable for locals to pay their own entrance fee, if they came independently and not with a tourist. From 1998 onwards, more and more locals were expecting a tourist who was in the car with them or someone they just befriended in the queue to pay the entrance fee for them (a gesture which was encouraged by the party organizers as the tourist would pay for all the higher “foreign fee” in US\$ and since the dollar ceased being accepted in 2004, in CUC. Since 2008, the wave has been turning again, with the improvement in conditions and perhaps a more sophisticated attitude towards tourists, and I noticed more and more Cubans paying their own entrance fee and not automatically expecting the tourist they had just met to pay for them. This observation, obviously very generalised, is based on my own experience in the *fiestas* I attended, and was confirmed by Cuban and tourist informants.

which looked like a parking lot or an empty junk-yard. The party was already in full swing. The Weather Girls instantly marked the scene as a “gay zone,” as did the same-sex couples kissing and dancing, and some *locas* who were already dancing solo in a frenzy. Out of the approximately two hundred people, 150 were dancing. I noticed that twenty of the rest who were standing in different corners were tourists. It struck me that, unlike parties in the West, at an early stage of the party (11pm, the doors opened at 10.20pm), the dancefloor was already packed and the DJ was playing a string of high bpm¹⁰⁰ “catharsis songs” generating screams and hands being lifted in the air, which usually in gay parties I attended elsewhere, happens only in later hours after the audience had been well warmed up.

While most of the tourists in the party were wearing casual shorts and T-shirts, most Cubans were dressed up and well groomed. In 1995 (and until 1998), I still couldn't see many logos and brand names on the clothes, as I did in later years, but many wore gold and silver jewelry (wrist bands, chains), a capitalist symbol, miles away from the ordinary working-man image idolised by the Cuban revolution.

A DJ was overseeing the up-beat music while black-market beer, rum, and soft drinks were being sold at an improvised bar. The yard was walled all around, with a big gate to close in the party-goers. People were dancing in the open under a clear, starry sky. Since this activity is illegal, the *fiesta* organisers hire guards posted a few miles away from the location, whose job is to identify each taxi or car arriving. I remember at one point I saw the organisers rush in panic to the closed gate, as an unidentified car was sighted approaching the venue. Speaking with one of the organisers later, I was told they were afraid that it was a police raid, but it turned out to be an unfamiliar driver who was driving tourists to the party. This incident repeated itself in one way or another in many of the *fiestas* I attended-- the constant fear of a police *redada* (raid).

Still, in spite of the clandestine nature of the party, when stepping in, I was instantly taken by the friendly and warm atmosphere. Many partygoers were staring and smiling at me (and at any other unaccompanied foreign males) in a friendly manner. I was soon

¹⁰⁰ Beats per minutes, indicating the tempo of a rhythmic musical piece, a term especially used by DJs playing electronic dance music.

invited to dance. “You ... see few lost souls at a Havana *fiesta*,” wrote Lumsden (1996:143). Indeed, for a North American or European tourist, the experience in a Havana *fiesta* is quite unique. Even if a person arrives on his own (as I did in this 1995 *fiesta* and several times thereafter), he will soon be approached and invited to dance. I couldn’t avoid noting the difference between gay parties/clubs I attended in London and other big US and European cities in the mid-to-late 1990s and the Havana *fiestas*--the friendliness, the absence of drugs, and the instant feeling of freedom and “laissez faire” when you are inside the party (as an abrupt contrast to the “outside”. Lumsden describes a similar experience in the mid-90s *fiestas*:

What will he [a US gay tourist] remember about these parties on his return to the United States? Certainly not the décor and the music [perhaps he means the inadequate sound-system], nor the drugs or rather lack of them. Nor the sex for there is surprisingly little sexual activity going on ... the parties are made memorable by the animation and warmth of the people there and by the opportunity to connect, unmediated by fetishistic, market-driven preoccupations with looks and fashion (ibid.)

The absence of “preoccupations with looks and fashion” was true in the mid 1990s, in the height of the financial crisis, when Lumsden conducted his research. Later, towards the late 1990s, with the increase in tourism and resources, fashion accessories and brand names have become more and more visible in the *fiestas*, as in Havana’s streets, as I will describe below. In the *reggaetón* era, post 2000, the *fiestas* in Havana have even become obsessively “preoccupied with looks and fashion”, influenced by hip-hop fashion.

As for sexual activity in the parties, my experience was different from Lumsden’s in this respect. The feeling of “laissez faire” I experienced in the *fiestas* included physical contact and sexual activities, in great contrast to the physical distance gays had to keep when outside this space.

Music is, of course, the lead player in the *fiesta* experience. The music I heard in 1995 and in the following years until 2000 was a combination of Cuban salsa and *timba* with U.S. House, Latino House, US. Hispanic dance music, and Eurodance hits (mostly of Spanish, Italian and UK origin). In some cases I was quite surprised to hear the most current U.S. hits in Havana. I asked the DJ how he gets hold of the U.S. and European music and he told me that he had a gay friend in Miami who sends him new CDs and vinyl records every few months with traveling relatives coming to visit. This system of

getting hold of current dance music via relatives and friends visiting was used by most of the DJs that I met in gay *fiestas*.

Changes in Havana's gay *fiestas* scene

Havana has always been a party town for gays (Lumsden 1996:141), and the gay *fiestas* were, and still are, the emblem of homosexual social life in Havana. They were popular even during the revolution's early phases, despite the anti-homosexual rhetoric and constant threat of a *redada*, or police raid (ibid.:142), and continued thriving even during the Special Period's dreariest times in the early 1990s. Given the lack of gay bars and clubs, the *fiestas de diez pesos* held at weekends, symbolise the Havana gay scene during the Special Period more than anything else. They continue to provide the main social gathering opportunity for Havana's gays. These *fiestas* are named after the original entrance fee, 10 local pesos (or, for foreigners, 1-2 USD, and later 1-2 CUC).

Having attended 45 *fiestas* in different locations and in different periods of time between 1995 and 2007¹⁰¹, I have witnessed a rapid change, driven by the changes in the economic and social texture of Havana, rise in tourism, and changes in media and the amount of exposure to outside influences. The DJs' sound systems in 2007 were still not the best, but they have improved drastically compared to the improvised systems used in the *fiestas* of the early 1990s.

Additionally, the cited "market-driven preoccupation with looks and fashion" which did not exist in the early-to-mid 1990s *fiestas* (Lumsden 1996:43), became a strong feature of the late 1990s *fiestas* scene, strongly connected to the increasing interaction with tourists. Cuban gays frequenting the *fiestas* are as much "fashion victims" as their counterparts in Europe or the United States, and sport brand-name clothes, accessories, and other "fashion statements", generally received as gifts from tourists, or from relatives in North America. Hedonism and vanity are as much part of Havana's gay nightlife these days as it is anywhere in the West, and perhaps even more, considering the hassles and

¹⁰¹ See Fig. 4.1 for list of fieldwork trips and *fiestas* attended.

resolver improvisations required to obtain any fashionable clothes.¹⁰²

One of the more popular fashion items I saw in many of the mid- to late-1990s *fiestas* were the U.S. flag bandanas. It was illegal to wear them publicly, and wearing them in the *fiestas* was another symbol of freedom and resistance, encouraged by the feeling of being in a safe place, a space for outcasts. Together with the increase of *santería*-related accessories such as coloured bead necklaces and wristbands, a trend which will be discussed in Chapter 9, brand names such as Adidas, Nike, Calvin Klein and Dolce & Gabbana became an obsession of young generation Cubans,¹⁰³ another expression of resistance in a country which for many years ideologically combated capitalist brand fetish and where huge signposts feature, instead of commercial advertising, ideological propaganda such as Ché Guevara's quotes: "*Hasta la victoria siempre*" ("Forever, until victory") and "*Venceremos*" ("we will win").

Yuri (age 30), a DJ who has been working in *fiestas* since the early 1990s, says about Havana's post-2000 *fiestas* scene: "Things are changing – more *extranjeros*, more Adidas, but the *fiestas* are still very Cuban, friendly, crazy and ...illegal" (PersCom 2001).

Indeed when it comes to the general feel of friendliness, liminality, and a being in a "safe space" for identity expression, the *fiestas* remained the same. The gatherings differed in size, in popularity, in the quality of the sound system, and the drinks. However, common to all were the care-free atmosphere, the friendly and open attitude, the strong sensual vibe, the fact that most people were dancing, the high volume of the music (even in locations surrounded by neighbours), and a feeling of safety and assuredness mixed with the nagging fear of a police raid.

The logistics of *fiesta*-attending also did not change much over the years. The

¹⁰² Many Cuban gays I befriended hinted in one way or another that they would love to receive any garment as *regalo* (present) before I went back home. On many of my trips to Cuba I found myself returning home with hardly any of the clothes I had brought, having left them all as *regalos*. The habit started in the early years of the Special Period, when tourists just started flooding the island during the worst years of the crisis, and were leaving clothes and other fashion accessories with their local friends, as well as soap, cosmetics and even chewing gum. Many tourists, especially in the gay scene, leave designer items and other clothes to local guys they meet, or take them shopping in "Dollar stores" in Havana, which offer a very limited (and usually second-class but expensive) selection of fashionable clothes, shoes, and accessories. This results with the sight of many young gays at the *fiestas* wearing anything from Levis Jeans to Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger tops and Nike and Adidas trainers.

¹⁰³ See photo 6.7

parties are still clandestine, although to a much lesser degree, and they are not advertised anywhere, but many of them have a semi-permanent base for a while, such as the Parque Lenin *fiestas*. With the scarcity of private cars, the way to get to the parties is still by legal and illegal taxis from the Yara cinema. There are more tourists now, and as I described before, Cuban gays already in the Yara cinema area are trying to find tourists to take them to the parties, pay for the taxi ride and the entrance fee. What was taken in 1995 as a gesture of good will and accepted with gratitude, now seems a common practice and taken for granted. The atmosphere in the post-2000 *fiestas* I attended were still very friendly and carefree but the Cuban gays are much more accustomed to tourists and adapted a more Western attitude of mannerist alienation. Unlike the 1995 *fiesta* when I was stared at and approached by different Cuban guys within 10 minutes of my arrival (a pattern which repeated in the *fiestas* I attended in the 1990s), this time I waited in the corner for nearly an hour until approached. Looks did not necessarily translate into conversations and the locals seemed more alienated in their attitude.

As for the police interference with the *fiestas*. . . the regular *redadas* that broke up gay *fiestas* in the earlier years of the Revolution may be a thing of the past, but even in 2010, once in a while the police either close down a party, or raid it on the pretext of searching for drugs or for minors, making gay gathering in Cuba difficult once more, in spite (and some say, because) of CENESEX's tolerance campaigns. Abel Sierra Madero, who researches homosexuality in Cuba explains, "[r]ather than seeing a progress like in other countries we see here a situation of waves, when things go better for a while, and then go backwards. Just like other things in Cuba, like the financial situation and like life here in general" (Interview 2006).

I have experienced these alternating moods throughout my fieldwork. The 1994 and early 1995 relaxation in police harassment following a wave of pro-gay tolerance did not last long. By the second half of 1995, the very few gay-friendly clubs and bars in the city had been closed down by the police (such as El Joker, which I visited in 1994, a government-owned disco known as gay-friendly, with same-sex couples dancing). Another wave of gay nightlife "cleansing" took place in 1997 as part of an operation supposedly targeting drugs and prostitution, many *fiestas* were raided, and the few unofficial and clandestine gay clubs that still existed were shut down. In 1997, I was in a

fiesta when the music stopped abruptly and everyone dispersed rapidly, as the organisers received a tip-off that the police were on their way. In the same year, a *fiesta* in El Periquitón, a clandestine gay club in the outskirts of Havana, was raided by the police on the pretext that there were prostitutes and minors in the club. Embarrassingly for the police, quite a few celebrities were there that night, including French designer Jean-Paul Gaultier, Spanish film director Pedro Almodóvar, and Swedish actress Bibi Andersson, accompanied by Alfredo Guevara, the openly gay head of the Cuban Film Institute and a revolution friend of Fidel Castro.¹⁰⁴ Still, police raids on gay *fiestas* are rare nowadays, unless justified by information on drugs or the presence of minors.

The musical repertoire played and danced in the *fiestas* has also changed. The mid-to late-1990s *fiestas* were dominated by House, salsa, and *timba*, whereas the post-2000 *fiestas* were dominated by *reggaetón*. In the next sections, I will monitor this change and describe the various genres popular in the *fiestas* throughout the research period, how they functioned as a tool for social identity performance (Sterling 2010:21-23), and as an interface for interaction and interconnection both with the Other and with one's own identity.

Two kinds of *fiestas*

Throughout the research period there were two different kinds of gay *fiestas* taking place in Havana on weekends: the smaller parties in private homes, and the big semi-public *fiestas*, usually staged in open spaces in the outskirts of town, such as those held in the Parque Lenin during the last years of my research period.¹⁰⁵ This division continued to exist throughout the fieldwork period.

The private home fiestas

Prior to the Special Period, and even back in the early days of the Revolution, gay

¹⁰⁴ Source: "Government Attacks against Homosexuals", news report by Jesus Zuñiga, APIC. <http://www2.fiu.edu/~fcf/homosexuals.arrested.9497.html> (accessed 1.3.2008).

¹⁰⁵ See map in Fig. 4.2

parties frequently took place in private homes. (Sierra Madero, interview 2006). Organised through word-of-mouth, these gatherings sometimes saw as many as a hundred people crammed into a private home to listen and dance to recorded music, drink cheap local rum, and feel free to express their sexuality. Parties of this type still take place every weekend all over Havana.¹⁰⁶ They are less publicised and are more discreet than the larger public *fiestas*. One evening in 1999, I was taken to such a party in a small third-floor apartment in a dilapidated house in central Havana. Two lesbians, the organisers, were vetting those queuing to get in. Far from the public eye, inside the block's stairway they collected the entrance fee and led you up the stairs to a livingroom crowded with gays and lesbians dancing. In this kind of set-up there is a DJ and cheap rum and beer is sold in a corner. In this case, most of the people in the room were Cubans, and very few foreigners who had established close bonds with locals as I had. Unlike the big, semi-public, outdoor *fiestas*, there was no *jineterismo* or "tourist hunting" activity going on. We foreigners received no particular attention. The locals all seemed to know one another and everyone was dancing, except some of the tourists. Alejandro (27), the guy who invited me to the party, explained:

There are no *jineteros* here. The *jineteros* usually go to the big *fiestas* in Parque Lenin, as they know that there are many foreigners there. This is more a real local *fiesta* just for fun. The music makes us feel free, and as you can see people are not afraid to kiss and touch each other, which they would not dare do outdoors. This fiesta is more for *us*, for Cuban gays. Sometimes you will find here guys who are known *jineteros* who go to the Parque Lenin with foreigners, but once in awhile they come here just to mix with their Cuban [gay] friends. (PersCom 1999)

Unlike the big *fiestas* mentioned by Alejandro, these small in-town *fiestas* change location frequently to avoid police attention. When I left the party, I asked where the next week's party would be held. One of the organisers gave me a sheet of paper with the telephone number of Havana's special "gay party line" scribbled on it. When one calls the number (only operative from Friday morning until Sunday night), a voice message rather hastily and incoherently gives an address in the typical Havana way, namely, just as a junction between two streets, and no number, for example: "Concordia y Virtudes". I had to call the number several times to catch the address properly. Once a person actually

¹⁰⁶ See video in Appendix II/1

gets to the junction, he or she finds people gathering outside the appointed house's entrance, indicating where the *fiesta* is being held.¹⁰⁷

The semi-public fiestas

Although *fiestas* have been part of the *ambiente* for decades now, in the Special Period they flourished and became the regular highlight of the week. Almost every weekend, except in periods of police clamp down, closures and *redadas*, there was a big semi-public *fiesta* in a large enclosed open-air space, in a far-away secluded location on the outskirts of the town, like the *fiesta* I described in the beginning of this chapter. These privately and illegally organised parties addressed the need for a relatively private space for gays to meet and listen to dance music together, and moreover a place to feel free, “identify,” and interact freely, both socially (dancing, “camping it up”, et cetera) as well as sensually (kissing and touching).

Unlike the home *fiestas* described above, the larger, semi-public *fiestas* offer a bigger space far from the city centre, and an opportunity to freely mix with other gays and tourists; they operate with an open door policy. Such *fiestas* are not only well-organised, they are also successful commercial ventures, and constitute “one of the entrepreneurial activities springing up all over Cuba” (Lumsden 1996:142). Black-market drinks are sold, and they have a DJ with a proper sound system, playing music until the early hours of the morning. They often take place in spacious car parks and open spaces out of town, such as Parque Lenin, where in the last years of my research period, the biggest weekend parties were held, mostly without any police harassment (which, according to some of my informants, were readily bribed by the organisers). As Lumsden wrote in 1996,

In some respects the fiestas are institutionalized in the sense that they are regular occurrences at the same address. ... In spite of the fact that the parties must be illegal since they charge admission and sell black-market liquor, the state seemingly tolerates their existence. ... Neither the police nor the CDRs can be unaware of the *fiestas'* existence, given the number of patrons they attract, the noise level, and the fact that many take place on consecutive week-end nights (Lumsden 1996:142).

¹⁰⁷ This practice of “party address info phone lines” giving the address in the day the party takes place was also used in the UK rave scene (St. John 2004:70), and in the US “house parties” scene which was crucial in the evolution of disco in the USA in the early 1970s. (Lawrence 2003:5-32)

Photos 6.1, 6.2 Home *fiesta* in 1997 (photos: Moshe Morad)



Photo 6.3 Big semi-public *fiesta* at Parque Lenin (Source: “The Lost Boy” blog http://blogs.indiewire.com/thelostboy/archives/cuba_part_ii_gay-rilla/# accessed: 3.9.2010)



Photo 6.4 Big semi-public *fiesta* at secret location (photo: Moshe Morad, 2007)



Photo 6.5 *Extranjeros* at big semi-public *fiesta* (photo: Moshe Morad, 2007)



Photo 6.6 [left] Dancer and drag queen (Kiriam) at a home *fiesta* (photo: Moshe Morad, 2005)

Photo 6.7 [right] Fashion brands and a *santería* bracelet at a big semi-public *fiesta* (photo: Moshe Morad, 2005)



“Gay salsa”: queering the Casino dancing-style

Born in New York in the early 1970s, salsa has its origins in Cuban *son* music, and in Cuba has its own dance style, known as *casino* (differing from the New York City and Los Angeles salsa dancing-styles).¹⁰⁸ In its early years the American term salsa has been considered controversial in Cuba, associated with U.S. cultural imperialism and "stolen" Cuban heritage. The term was hardly used in the Cuban media (Steward 2000:494), which even when playing it, called it *músicaailable* (dance-able music) or *casino*, which referred more to the popular dance style than to the music itself. Furthermore, the term was criticised for its superficiality and was considered by Cuban musicologists an artificial marketing tool to sell “Latin music” to non-Latinos (Manuel 2006:74). Artificial, superficial, imperialistic or not, salsa became the umbrella term for popular Latino dance music, and was embraced throughout Latin America and around the world. Its reach included Special Period Cuba where, with the opening of the island to mass tourism, the music and dance became one of the island’s main attraction to foreigners (with salsa tours, and salsa dance workshops offered to tourists). The popular local dance genre was renamed salsa *cubana* (to distinguish from the U.S.-originated salsa), a term which was also, quite confusingly used also for *timba*.

Salsa is of course more than just a dance style. It has life of its own outside the dancefloor (such as other Latino “dance” genres like samba and tango), and its musical and lyrical aspects have been thoroughly discussed in many academic works.¹⁰⁹ However, in the context of this chapter, I focus on the dancefloor behavior observed in gay *fiestas*, on the “sal-psychology” of its gay dancers, and its appropriation and “queerification” via challenging its *macho* heterosexual dance-style.

“The foreign gaze” (i.e. tourists) see salsa primarily as a torso-centred dance reflecting sensuality, an interplay between male and female, and sexual teasing. Rather than run away from this stereotype, criticised by many of my Cuban informants, I will focus on salsa, as a signifier of gay identity, expression and interaction. Unlike disco and

¹⁰⁸ See video-clip of casino-style dancing from a Cuban TV programme “Bailar Casino” (Dancing Casino) in Appendix II/2.

¹⁰⁹ Aparicio 1998, Steward 1999, Román-Velazquez 1999, Morales 2003, and more.

house, salsa is far from being “gay” in its history or musicality (except for some rhythmic and structural elements which, I argue, correspond to gay sensibility, and will be discussed in the musical analysis section in the next chapter); however, the particular way it is danced in gay parties and clubs, and appropriated, gives salsa its queer twist.

Unlike contemporary popular dance-styles in Eurocentric cultures, which are generally unisex, or even solo, not requiring a partner, salsa, *timba* and later *reggaetón* have highly-gendered couple dance styles, with male and female roles. The dance therefore provides a performance/performativity space for homosexuals to either express their identification with a female role, or rebel against conservative gender division by creating a queer space, challenging gender divisions and roles. salsa is essentially a couple’s dance¹¹⁰ traditionally associated with heterosexuality, *machismo*, and clear male/female role division. The genre’s heterosexuality is expressed both in the lyrics and in the dance movements, whereby the man grips the woman and leads the steps, and the woman follows. Latino gays around the world and Cuban gays in the 1990s have used gender-divisive salsa in a male-to-male or female-to-female way, thus creating a queer salsa sensibility.(see photos 6.8-11)

Salsa, with its phallogentric discourse (Aparicio 1998:123) and drag shows, two of the spheres/spaces described in this thesis, are good paradoxical examples of how it takes a very gendered and gender-divisive artistic expression to mould a gay or queer identity. Salsa does so by challenging--and even ridiculing--established gender perceptions, and creating a queer space of its own design. Rey, looking at the salsa scene among Latina lesbians in the U.S. notes how “a profoundly heterosexual articulation is promptly queered, and reconfigured under a different cultural autonomy. Through re-interpretive listening practices, this masculinist idiom is reinscribed with liberatory meaning” (Rey 2006:126). Here, I show how this is done in Havana’s gay *fiestas* not only through reinterpretive listening practices, but also through reinterpretive dancing practices.

In the classic salsa/*casino* dance hold, the man’s hands keep a firm grip on the woman at the base of her spine, while the woman’s arms wrap loosely round him for support. When danced by two males, this patent gender-division in the dance-roles offers

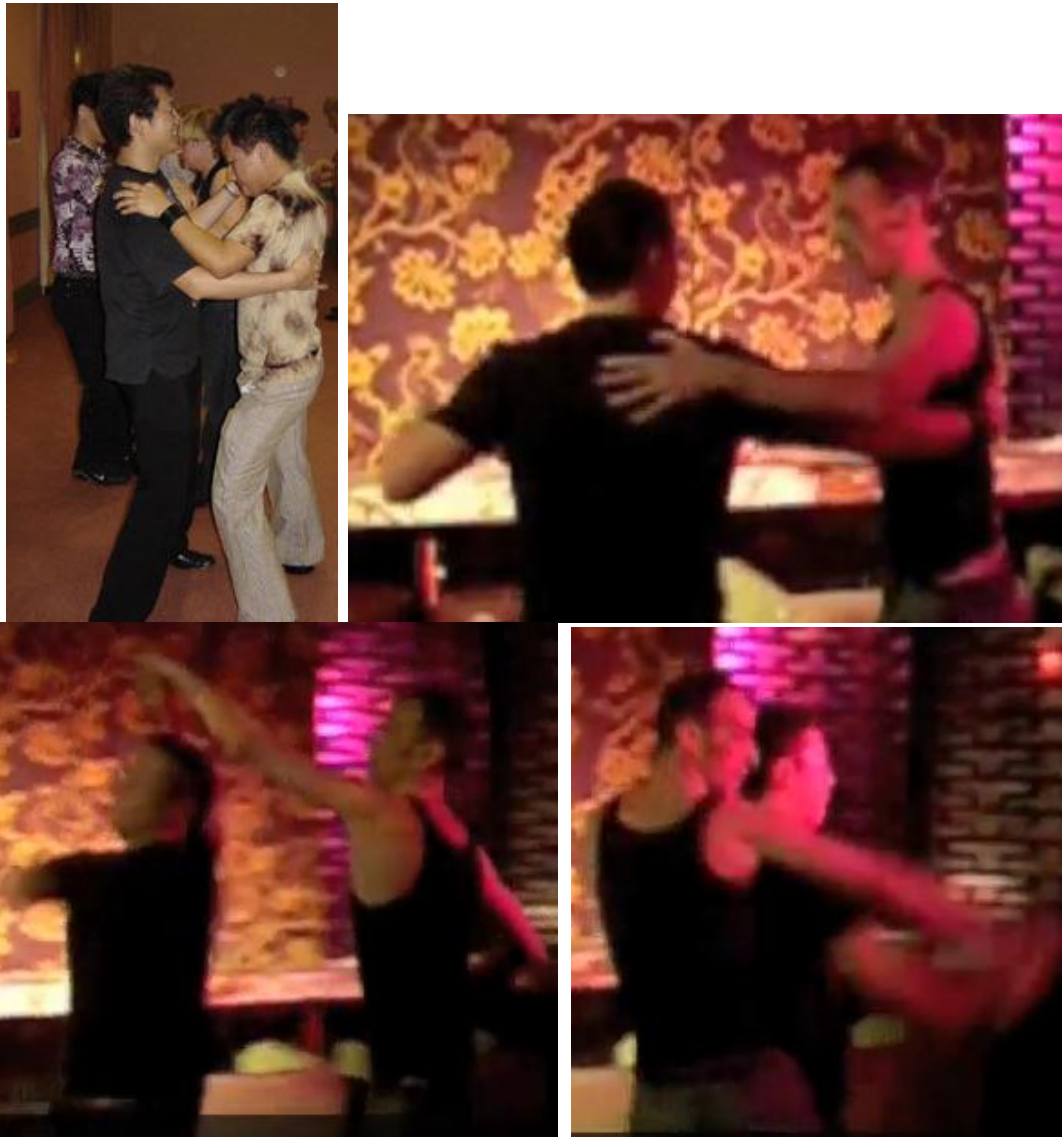
¹¹⁰ In this chapter I relate only to the *casino* couple-style and not to the *rueda de casino* round-dancing style danced in groups, which is much less popular in Havana’s gay *fiestas*.

an opportunity for the two gay dancers to declare their sexual orientation via the hold. When the couple wants to portray a clear masculine/feminine or *macho/maricón* role division, the man who takes the role of the woman leans on his partner's shoulder, allows the *macho*, who holds him by the lower back (as a man holds a woman), to lead, and at certain times replaces the frontal position in the dance with dancing backwards so that his backside faces the *macho's* groin, making swinging movements of his buttocks, or sometimes even provocatively pressing his behind against his partner's genital zone (see photo 6.10 below). This "gay move" is the prototype of the *perreo* ("doggy-style") dance style which will be described in the section dedicated to *reggaetón* in this chapter.

The evident masculine/feminine role division is more a thing of the past or of the provinces. In many of today's *fiestas* in Havana, there are no manifest roles or they are flexible. Most dancing couples are composed of two gay males without any visible *macho/maricón* polarisation. They swap positions and roles at any time in the course of the dance, or hold each other by the lower back or by the shoulders, thus creating a whole new space of "queer salsa," subverting the role divisions embedded both in traditional Cuban homosexuality, and in traditional salsa dancing, and making a statement about the versatility of modern "*internacional*" gay identity.¹¹¹ This "queer salsa" challenges and destabilises the traditional heterosexuality of salsa, and it is rather amusing to observe the surprised and sometimes shocked faces of the many traditional salsa aficionados I took to gay clubs and parties to witness the queer version of their favourite dance.

¹¹¹ "*Internacional*" is a term used in Cuba gay discourse for "sexually versatile", i.e. can be both passive and active.

Photos 6.8, 6.9, 6.10, 6.11 Gay salsa



Sources: top left: <http://www.starobserver.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/web-Same-Sex-Salsa.jpg>
Other photos: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2lw-KRz5P4> (both accessed: 8. 6.2012)

Sexual/gender roles may change, but salsa remains distinctly a couples' dance. In the *fiestas* I have attended, rarely have I encountered individuals dancing salsa solo. When the music is on, couples start dancing, or an individual invites someone else for the dance. Despite the overtly sensual pose and hip-to-hip movements, the two dancers might be complete strangers to each other. Furthermore, an invitation for a dance does not automatically translate as "making a pass" at someone, as is the case in other cultures, and even in heterosexual salsa dancing. Raúl, a twenty-five-year-old salsa/*casino* fan and

teacher of *casino*-style dancing whom I met at five different *fiestas*, observing his on and off dancefloor behavior, explains:

In the gay world the fact that I invite a guy for a dance does not mean I fancy him, and many times it is just for one dance, and we don't even talk during or after the dance. In fact I normally choose someone who dances well. Many times it is spontaneous, if the song starts and I want to dance and there are no friends next to me, I just ask someone available standing or sitting nearby and we dance. He doesn't have to be good-looking or anything like that. I can dance with many partners in one evening, and the guy I like and want to spend the night with will not be one of them. [As is the case] when there is a cute foreigner in the *fiesta*, and he is too shy to dance but stands in the corner just drinking. I will dance all night with different Cuban partners and keep an eye on him every once in a while. I will talk to him but when I feel like dancing, if he doesn't want to, I will just ask someone standing next to us for a dance. We [Cubans] take dancing in a natural spontaneous way, no big deal, like you see in the old [Western] movies, where inviting someone for a dance means you intend to marry her. There is also no jealousy involved. If I am with my boyfriend and he doesn't feel like dancing one song and I do, I immediately choose another partner and it is fine, and vice versa. It is the fact that you cannot dance salsa alone, and so, people must dance with each other even if they don't know each other. It's only a dance. (PersCom 2001)

To summarise, the genderised nature of the salsa/*casino* dance style is exactly what makes it such an important dancing expression of gay identity. Males taking female roles, and vice-versa, create a queer space in which sensuality and sexuality are versatile, interchangeable, and challenge traditional gender roles. "What drag queens do when they are on stage, we can do on the dance floor--be a man and a woman at the same time, or just say 'anything goes,' don't label us..."(Raúl, 25, PersCom 2001).

Queer *timba*: "Watch how the locas do the despelote"

Described by Hernandez-Reguant (2006) as "a macho sound for black sex," *timba* has become a powerful musical symbol and signifier of the Special Period. In this section, I show how even the most macho music/dance genre is "queerified" in Havana's gay *fiestas*.

Timba is a style of dance music that emerged in the late 1980s and flourished in Havana between the early to mid 1990s. Perna called it "the sound of the Cuban crisis" (2005a), as it evolved from and was strongly influenced by the unique socio-economic and socio-psychological circumstances of the toughest years of the financial crisis. *Timba* is characterised by socially-critical lyrics (under the limitations of freedom of speech in

Cuba; and by frantic, wild but carefully controlled, provocative and intense music, and similar dance routines. Musically, in spite of being *clave*¹¹²-based and typically Cuban, and with such an intensity of sound and virtuosity which make it difficult to export outside Cuba, *timba* has strong roots in such American (but now global) musical styles as funk, jazz, R&B, rock, and hip-hop. It is also strongly influenced by Afro-Cuban secular and religious music, with deep roots in rumba, and it mainly uses the rumba *clave*.

Fig. 6.2



In many *timba* pieces the drums and even the bass guitar emulate the sound and role of the sacred *batá* drums. (Juan de Marcos Gonzáles interview, 2003). This can be seen as a musical manifestation of Afro-Cuban identity, and of protest both against the suppression and marginalisation of Afro-Cuban religion by the revolutionary regime, and against the social taboos inflicted by the religion itself.

Timba is complex and highly sophisticated, played by skilled conservatoire-trained musicians (Perna 2005a:3), and at the same time it draws on raw street discourse and attitude. It “combines the spirit of the popular *barrio* with sophisticated arrangements and lives in duality between smoothness and street culture, dance and art music” (Perna 2005a:3). According to Perna, *timba* is eclectic, yet fundamentally Black, as it

appears to defy binary stylistic oppositions such as national vs. foreign, traditional vs. modern, and local vs. global, weaving together a range of sounds that are all inscribed onto the musical expressive range of the black diaspora. In a sense it may be argued that the

¹¹² *Clave* ("key") is a repeating two measure rhythmic pattern, in which each measure is diametrically opposed, and both are balanced opposites. The repetition of the pattern causes an alteration of the two opposed poles, creating the "pulse and rhythmic drive" (1999:25) which characterizes Cuban and Cuban-derived music, the "timeline" of the music, sometimes not heard but always felt. (See Fig. 6.2 for *clave* patterns.)

musical nature of *timba* lies precisely in the way it draws eclectically on the whole sonic rainbow of the black Atlantis, in a sequence that opens with rumba and closes with hip-hop. (Perna 2005a:98).

Perna also emphasises the ambiguity of *timba* and the way it defies binary traditional stylistic oppositions: “[*T*]imba owes its significant political power not so much to the content of its messages, but to the multiplicity and ambiguity of the meanings it generates” (2005a:5).

Rather than looking primarily at race/colour as an important signifier in *timba*, as Perna does, I look at the gender and sexual ambiguity and multiplicity embedded in the genre and in the way it is appropriated in gay *fiestas* and in a gay identity context. This generates new meanings and resonates well with the ambiguous, non-binary characteristics of Cuban homosexuality,¹¹³ and with resistance expressed by cross-gender manipulation.¹¹⁴

One of the obvious manifestations of this gender/sexuality multiplicity and ambiguity is in the way *timba* is danced. In contrast to couple-oriented salsa, as described in the previous section, *timba* dancing emphasises individuality. It is intense, virtuosic, self-centered, sensual and sexy, expressing various and some time contradictory messages. Usually in the first *tema* (part) of the song, couples dance in the old fashioned *casino* style. But when the *montuno* starts, the couples split apart and the female solo begins with the *despelote*, the point of “liberation” (physical and symbolic). *Despelote* means mess, chaos, frenzy, or “all over the place” as described by Fairley (2006:472), a provocative dance style where the pelvis is gyrated rapidly, accompanied by thrusting and shaking motions, bending over and shaking the bottom (West-Duran, 2008), with movements such as *batidora* (“blender”, rapid pelvic rotations, imitating a blender) and *tembleque*, shaking, “vibrating and trembling as if by effect of electrocution” (Perna 2005a:152).¹¹⁵

The *despelote* is “often accompanied by hand and body gestures mimicking self-

¹¹³ See Appendix IV

¹¹⁴ Perna investigates “shifts in gender role,” as will be quoted below. However, he does not touch upon homosexuality and *timba*’s role in the gay *ambiente*, a sphere continually overlooked by so many other music analysts and researchers when it comes to Cuban music.

¹¹⁵ see video in Appendix II/3.

pleasuring” (Fairley 2006:472). On the one hand, it resembles and reflects sexual anxiety and on the other, Afro-Cuban religious spirit-possession. Men are either absent or play a fairly marginal role in the *despelote* section. The message here is ambiguous and, according to some, contradictory: a celebration of female emancipation from the old *macho casino* clutch, introducing a new independent, liberated woman who uses her body as a “major asset” (Fairley 2006:472). At the same time, as Fairley notes, the female body “could be read symbolically as the ‘convertible currency’ of the Special Period, ‘exchanged’ between Cuban males/musicians and foreign men” (ibid.). I do not see these two representations contradicting, but rather conveying a dual-subversive message, as it takes an emancipated woman in full control to “allow” this exchange, and to benefit from it. Indeed, the origins of *despelote* are strongly connected to *jineterismo*. In the early 1990s, *despelote* was mainly practised by *jineteras* in tourist dance clubs as a means of “displaying their goods” and drawing attention. This was emphasized in the “*subasta de la cintura*” (waist auction) contests, where in *timba* shows, during the *montuno*, a group of women from the audience would go on stage and do the *despelote* and men were encouraged to toss money at the most convincing one. Fairley and Perna suggest that the dominant role of women in *timba* (and later on in *reggaetón*) is a reflection of the diminishing economic role of men, and the increasing economic role of women during the Special Period (Fairley 2004:92, Perna 2005a:154). Furthermore, it is a “reflection of the independence and entrepreneurial spirit of *jineteras* in the new, dollar-driven milieu” (Manuel 2006:60).

These ideas are reflected in the lyrics of *timba* songs which on one side celebrate this new “independence”, and on the other side brings the voice of men complaining about the powerful woman or *jinetera* who goes her own way, and leaves her powerless Cuban man in favour of rich tourists. One classic example is “La bruja” (“The witch”), written in 1994 by José Luis Cortés and performed by his band NG La Banda. A song which was extremely popular in the mid 1990s and was featured in all *fiestas* I attended until 1999.¹¹⁶ Perna dedicated a large section to the song in his chapter about sex tourism, gender and representation of women in *timba* songs (2005a:195-207).

¹¹⁶ Audio: Appendix III/6

The lyrics say:

*Salgo de la casa aburrido, irritado,
A buscar tu silueta desesperado
Me encuentro a mí mismo, solo y cansado
La vida es un circo todos somos payasos
Escasean los magos, todo me da asco*

*Y esto me pasa porque faltas tú.
Tú te crees la mejor, tú te crees una artista
Porque vas en turistaxi por Buenavista
Buscando lo imposible*

*Porque a ti te falto yo también.
Tú cambiaste mi amor por diversiones baratas
El precio del espíritu no se subasta
Por eso te comparo yo con una bruja.*

*Tú eres una bruja
Una bruja sin sentimiento
Tú eres una bruja [...]*

I leave home, bored, irritated
desperately looking for your silhouette,
but I find only myself, alone and tired
Life is a circus, and we are all clowns
There are no magicians, everything puts me off

And that's because you are missing
You think you're the best, you think you're an artist
because you drive through Buenavista¹¹⁷ in a tourist taxi
looking for the impossible

because you miss me, too
you changed my love for cheap thrills
but the price of the spirit is not negotiable¹¹⁸
and that's why I compare you with a witch.

You are a witch
A witch with no feelings
You are a witch [...]

(Source: Froelicher 2005)

¹¹⁷ An upmarket neighborhood of Havana.

¹¹⁸ Here the lyrics say in fact, "the price of the spirit cannot be auctioned", hinting at the "waist-auction" dance routine as described above.

The long *montuno* section of the song has two chorus parts saying repeatedly: “*Oye bruja, coge tu palo y vete*” (“hey witch, take your [broom]stick and get out”; and “*Corre niño que te va a coger*” (“Run kid, as she is going to get you”). The verb “*coger*” also means “to fuck” in Latin American slang. On one level of “double meaning” this song gives the woman/witch much agency, as she threatens to “fuck” the man. On another level, when “queer appropriated” as I have witnessed in many mid 1990s gay *fiestas*, the song gets a strong (homo)sexual innuendo, as the “*bruja*” can relate to a man or transvestite in gay argot discourse (just like *loca* or “bitch”). At many *fiestas*, I observed a special “performance” of this song: the dancer joined in and sang these repeating chorus parts. When referring to “palo” (stick) they pointed to their crotches and made gestures indicating an erect penis.

The power of the liberated woman/witch, a woman who can “fuck” a man, is celebrated by gays. Marco, a thirty-year-old dance teacher from Havana, puts it this way: “If once the man was the male peacock in Cuban dance--like the *rumberos* [rumba male dancers] are doing the *columbia*,¹¹⁹ it is now [in *timba*] the wild liberated woman who is the peacock showing off its feathers” (PersCom 2000).

This new, powerful, independent female role gives space for a Camp, gay and queer interpretations of *timba*. Powerful, independent, “don’t give a fuck” kind of women were always “role models” in global gay culture which adores, worships, and imitates divas (see Chapters 8 & 10). Furthermore, as will be demonstrated in Chapter 9, “feminine spheres”, such as *santería* worship are a fertile ground for gay expression and the creation of a gay space, as in traditional societies gays belong to the same social category fulfilling feminine roles and are considered to have similar sensitivities (Dianteill 2000:74).

While *timba* dancing celebrates feminine assertiveness, its music celebrates “an ethos of black machismo and a narrative of male hypersexuality” (Hernandez-Reguant 2004:5). *Timba* is indeed described by musicians as “*macho*” (Juan de Marcos Gonzáles Interview 2003, Hernandez-Reguant 2004), due to its aggressive brass sound and “tightness” and the inclusion of a *macho* drum used in *santería* rituals (Hernandez-

¹¹⁹ A virtuosic rumba dance genre danced solo by men.

Reguant 2004:18).¹²⁰ I argue that *timba*, in a way, reflects a competition between the *machismo* of the music and the female assertiveness of the dance. This conflict and celebration of the individual nature of both genders, unlike the celebration of the couple and the “dual unity” expressed in of salsa/*casino* dancing, provides a ground for queer interpretations and appropriations, and for gender manipulation on the dancefloor.

With its ecstatic solo dance moves, *timba* takes gender to the extreme, but also breaks its boundaries. The idea of a woman assuming the role of the peacock, or a man appropriating the role of a “wild and liberated woman,” may sound like a contradiction, but in the gay world such complete inversions are accepted and even celebrated. I witnessed queer interpretations of *timba* dancing throughout the *fiestas* I attended between 1995 and 2000, dominated by *despelote* performed by men. “Watch now how the *locas* do the *despelote*,” DJ Yuri told me during a *fiesta* in 1997, before initiating a long set of *timba* pieces. The *despelote*’s “declaration of independence” has been appropriated by gays and transgenders in the tradition of identifying with “liberated independent” women, admiring them and imitating them. In a way “queer *despelote*” is a 1990s version of drag shows and female impersonation, replacing the role model of the femme fatal/ diva, with a new one, the independent and entrepreneurial *jinetera*. In the post-2000 *reggaetón*, as described in the next section, the *despelote* became even wilder and more widely performed by men.

Despelote is also associated with exhibitionism, nervous breakdown, mental instability and “women who execute virtuosic and/or sexually explicit movements” (Moore 2006:125). In the case of *despelote* performed by effeminate men or transgenders, the association with a wild, crazy woman is even stronger, hence the expression *loca* (crazy, deranged). Watching queer *despelote*, it was impossible to avoid the comparison with spirit possession and trance-induced dances performed by *afeminados* (effeminate homosexuals) in *santería* rituals (Chapter 9), and with the performance of gay-icon Cuban diva, La Lupe (Chapter 10).

Thus, queer *timba* embraces what has been refer to as “androcentric and

¹²⁰ In Cuban musician’s discourse music is divided into “male” and “female” in character, a division based on the intensity of sound, the rhythmic elements, the style of performance and the tightness of the piece, and not necessarily on the gender of the performer (Juan de Marcos Gonzáles, interview 2003).

phallographic presentation and representation of heterosexual coupling” in Afro-Diasporic dancing (Gilroy 2000:184) and the independent female representation, and thrives on them. Gay discourse idealises the hypersexual male as well as the independent woman. The original *timba* expressions of over-masculinity and masculine hyper-sexuality, on one hand, and feminine liberation on the other, are celebrated and even over-amplified. In fact, as in salsa and drag shows, “camping it up” and “queer appropriation” are easier when applied to exaggerated “heterosexual” themes or genres. This subversive phenomenon is a major concept in Camp and queer appropriation. It can be seen in drag shows when the most *macho* symbols are used as a subject of “queerification;” for example, cowboys in the U.S., and in “underground” drag parties I attended in Cuba, Fidel Castro and Ché Guevara.

Furthermore, what may seem as a representation of heterosexual sex, with an easy twist, when two males perform the dance, this both in the front-to-front and “waist-auction” provocative movements of *timba* and certainly with the back-to-front *perreo* and even crotch -to-mouth moves of *reggaetón*, (see next section) can become “gay”. Also, in the lyrical context - provocative heterosexist texts such as “this little thing I have that gets up...,” “open your mouth babe...,” “suck my lollipop,” and “going down on you, no way” (Hernandez-Reguant 2006:5) can be easily “queer appropriated” from male-to-female to male-to-male, as I have witnessed in many *fiestas* when such lyrics are mimed by the dancers with extra Camp body movements clearly pinpointing on subjects and body parts.

Another important role of *timba* in the gay *fiestas* during the Special Period was the interaction between locals and tourists. By dancing *timba* and performing *despelote* at the *fiestas* local gays display an extreme version of their Cubanised body ¹²¹: wild, sensual, available, and ecstatic, to ignite the imagination of tourists. “For many young *habaneros*, thus, *timba* became both a subcultural manifesto and a practical means to gain access, via tourist dance clubs, to a world of sophistication and plenty,” writes Perna (2005a:55). He further expands on the “exchange value” of *timba* in a later published essay:

In the new, tourism-driven economy of mid-1990s Cuba, *timba* came thus to occupy a crucial mediating role between foreigners and Cubans. MB [*música bailable*] provided the

¹²¹ See the section “The gay Cuban dancing body and the sensualisation of the dancefloor” in the next chapter.

soundtrack for the encounters between Cubans and tourists in music clubs, making these into sites for the staging of Cuban sensuality, where young (mainly black) Cubans could exploit the cultural capital represented by their body, their ability to dance, their knowledge of music and of the “street”. *Timba* provided the talk of the town, helped to draw foreigners and young locals together in discos, promoted a suitably sensual, tropical image of the island, and filled the coffers of state-controlled companies managing dance clubs (Perna 2005b).

In 1997, I conducted a mini survey among 20 gay tourists who did not speak Spanish and therefore could not relate to the lyrics. I asked them to describe, in one word, their impression of *timba* music and dance as heard and seen performed in *fiestas*. The most common answers were: “African” (7), “exciting” (8), “aggressive” (9), “wild” (11), and “sexy” (14) (mini survey 1997). A sexual/sensual reading of local music and/or dance is always problematic, and raises issues of orientalism and of exoticising and eroticising the “native”. Perna opposes the sensual stereotyping of *timba*, and rather sees in it an expression of resistance and escapism, which he describes as “the concept of carnival, constructing a temporary liberation from scarcity, rhetoric and political control” (Perna 2005a:145). Whereas the whole issue of the “tourist view” and the sexualisation of the dancefloor in the context of the gay *fiestas* phenomenon in general will be discussed in the next chapter, in the case of *timba* I see no contradiction between an “erotic” reading and a “liberation from scarcity” reading. I argue that the expression of sensuality and sexuality, and the spirit of resistance and escapism, go hand-in-hand. Resistance can be aimed against the hetero-normative discourse, while “liberation from scarcity” can also entail a release from gender and sexual restrictions and stigmas, which is the essence of what is celebrated in the gay *fiestas*. This “liberation from scarcity” is strongly connected to the rampant hedonistic escapism that is so typical of Havana’s gay *ambiente* during the Special Period, and one of the three major themes of this thesis.

Following the dancefloor action in many *fiestas* and discussing *timba* with many “party-goers” and DJ informants, I came to the conclusion that “queer-appropriated *timba*” in the mid-1990s gay *fiestas* helped to articulate an independent and liberated gay identity, provided an outlet for self-affirmation and pride, was a reaction against the prevailing conservative attitudes towards gender-roles, and also went against a conservatism among gays themselves, whereby extravagance and feminine *loca* behaviour were frowned upon. *Timba* was also an important interface of interaction with

tourists, and a source of escapism, so needed in the scarcity of life during the Special Period.

I could not provide a better conclusion to this section than the answer I received from Manuelito, a 24-years old medical student and *timba* fan I had met at four different *fiestas*, when asked to express what he feels when dancing *timba*, answer which encompasses the three main themes in the title of this thesis--identity, interaction and escapism:

I feel liberated. I feel I can go crazy and behave as I wish, not as society expects me. I feel happy to be gay and to dance like a *loca* [crazy woman]. To express myself. To be what I am...“I am what I am” [starts singing Gloria Gaynor’s song, and laughs] [*identity*] ... what else? Well, I feel flattered that the tourists watch me with their tongue out sometimes, especially when I do this ass movement [demonstrates], and after that many come to talk to me or buy me a drink, and invite me somewhere [*interaction*] ... and who knows, maybe this will get me a *grongo* husband [laughs]... but meanwhile when I dance I feel somewhere else, I feel out of this shit hole, I feel in the best discothque in New York or somewhere...[*escapism*] (PersCom 2000)

“Re-gay-tón”: Queering *reggaetón*

With *reggaetón*, all young Cubans come out of the closet – the closed closet of Cuban life and the closet of Cuban dance music [with its set rules, MM], so maybe this is why we gay Cubans like it so much in the *fiestas*--because it means for us coming out of three closets ... triple freedom! We call it “Re-gay-tón...” (Yuslan, 22, PersCom 2005).

Reggaetón, a computerised mix of reggae, ragamuffin, hip-hop, Latino dance music (tropical and salsa), and techno started dominating Havana’s musicscape since the turn of the 21st century. In spite of “revolution” being a loaded term in the context of Cuba, it will not be an exaggeration to talk about a “*reggaetón* revolution” (Baker 2011) as it revolutionised concepts of musical production, as well as consumption, rhythm aspects of Cuban dance music, lyrics (using more direct, abrupt and “crude” expressions than ever before), dance routines, and brought a general rebellion against the “protocol” of Cuban dance music.

Originating as a fusion style in early 1990s Puerto Rico, evolving from Panamanian “Spanish-reggae”, it was heard in Havana’s *fiestas* already in the mid 1990s, mainly via personal imports from Puerto Rico, but gained mainstream popularity and a local-Cuban

identity in the turn of the century, with locally produced *reggaetón*, known as “*Cubaton*” or “*reggaetón a lo cubano*”, boasting such Cuban artists as Eddy K, Gente de Zona, Clan 537, Chacal, Baby Lores and Los 4/Los Salvajes.

Criticised by many as vulgar and superficial, the authorities and the official media disapproved of *reggaetón*. The official youth daily *Juventud Rebelde* called *reggaetón* derogatorily a reflection of “neoliberal thinking” (Israel 2009), and Culture Minister Abel Prieto declared that it should be “pushed away” (ibid.). Moreover, *Juventud Rebelde*, the official “newspaper of Cuban youth”¹²² which otherwise proclaims an “open, healthy non-judgmental attitude toward sexuality” (Fairley 2006:485), has denounced both *reggaetón*’s dance style – which the paper likens to “having sex with clothes on” (Fairley 2008:475), and the genre’s vulgar sexist lyrics:

The aggressiveness of the marginal essence of *regueton* has become discrimination against one’s fellow person, the animalization of eroticism, extreme obscenity in texts and destructive levels of undermining female dignity. ... The viewpoint of coarse and crude male domination — constantly minimizing the conscience of the feminine sex — that oozes from lyrics like this [examples given], is simply degrading. ... As a result of such songs, adolescents run the risk of using such barbarous frameworks of conduct as a model...(Molina, *Juventud Rebelde* 2007)¹²³

Still, the authorities’ attempts to “push” *reggaetón* away, did nothing to dent its popularity, and perhaps even increased it. According to Baker the Cuban *reggaetón* craze has even claimed rap artists and fans who “started to jump ship in increasing numbers” (Baker 2006:231), thus, in a way, “jumping” from a very heterosexual and even homophobic style to a “gay friendly” genre, as will be argued in this section.

Gay *fiesta*-goers embraced *reggaetón* with enthusiasm. The title of Jan Fairley’s essay “Dancing back to front: *regeton*, sexuality, gender and transnationalism in Cuba”(2006), relating to *reggaetón*’s backside-to-crotch *perreo* dancing style, takes on a special meaning in the context of this study: the appropriation of *reggaetón* by Cuban gays “who do it back to front anyway”, as commented with a smile one of my informants, Yuslan (PersCom 2007). Yuslan, a 24-years-old *reggaetón* aficionado and producer who

¹²² www.juventudrebelde.co.cu

¹²³ From “Misogamy in Reggaeton Lyrics” by Julio Martinez Molina, 15.1.2007 Rebelde.co.cu, the online version of the paper *Juventud Rebelde*. Source: <http://www.juventudrebelde.co.cu/columnists/2007-01-15/misogamy-in-reggaeton-lyrics/> (accessed: 17/5/2008).

was DJing in a *fiesta* I attended in 2002 became an important source of information on the genre and its status in the gay *fiestas*.

Another aspect of *reggaetón*'s gay appeal is based on the image of the genre's stars, the way they dress and look, and their statements on- and off-stage. Cuban *reggaetón* male stars tend to cultivate a "metrosexual" image, well-groomed, wearing jewelry, sexy clothing, fashion accessories, and even make-up, which is associated with the rising capitalism and consumerism in Special Period Havana, but also with a certain sexual ambiguity. When Whiteley (2006:249-262) writes about a similar trend in another *macho* musical culture, the cultivation of an androgynous image in the 1970s "glam rock" scene, with artists such as Marc Bolan, Mick Jagger and David Bowie, as a counter-act to the over-masculinity of "cock rock," she claims that "they also provide multiple possibilities of what it means to be male in our culture- one image may be used by gay men, another by heterosexual men" (ibid.:249,250). This explanation, taken into the context of *reggaetón* metrosexual imagery in 2000s Havana, can mean a further opening to acceptance and tolerance towards gays among non-gay, *reggaetón*-loving youth, and also a further self-esteem and identity-forming acceptance among young Cuban gays.

One of Cuba's leading *reggaetón* stars, cultivating a strong "metrosexual" image blended with "*santería* chic" is Baby Lores, who is rumoured to be gay, and does not try hard to hide it (some of his musical rivals even spread rumours about his past as a *pinguero* (male prostitute). He wears make-up, does his eyebrows, paints his finger-nails, and wears beads and clothes with blue and white colours associated with his *santería orisha Yemayá*, known to be the favourite of many gays. (Photo 6.12). Baby Lores is the first popular Cuban music star since the Revolution to portray a gay image, both in his looks and stage behaviour, with which many Cuban gays identify and feel proud. His approach follows the pro-gay and anti-homophobia path of another big *reggaetón* star, and a "gay icon" among gay *reggaetón* fans, Residente, leader of Puerto Rican band Calle 13, who has frequently expressed pro-gay and anti-homophobic views and performed in Gay Pride events (photo 6.13).

In a mini survey I conducted in 2005, I asked forty-five gays between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five who regularly went to the *fiestas* what their favourite music was. Forty-one (91%) replied *reggaetón*. In spite of being a very heterosexist genre in

essence, *reggaetón* is particularly popular among young gay Cubans, even more than among same-age non-gay Cubans. Whereas 91% of young gays mentioned it as their favoured genre, in a similar questionnaire among non-gay *fiesta*-goers of the same age range only 64% (16 out of 25) gave me the same answer, whereas hip-hop was the answer of 28% (7 out of 25) non-gays, and of only 4.5% (2 out of 45) of gays (Mini survey 2005).

Photo 6.12 (*left*) Baby Lores (Clan 537) (Photo: Nora Gámez-Torres, Havana 2007)

Photo 6.13 (*right*) Residente (Calle 13) (Source: <http://blogamole.tr3s.com/2009/05/15/Ms-cielo-news-residente-crowned-the-bigboss/> accessed: 3.9.2010)



The reggaetón dance style

Timba's frenzied *despelote* movements crossed over to *reggaetón*, and were enriched with sexually insinuating couple or trio dance moves such as the *perreo* (doggy-style), and "sandwich dancing" (Fairley 2006:478), when a woman (or a man, in the case of "gay" sandwich-dancing) is "sandwiched" between two men. Following the

independence of women already expressed in *timba* dancing, *reggaetón* dancing takes it a step further, and unlike traditional casino-style salsa, the couple dance routines give the female dancers the main role and control of the dance, where they present blatant sexuality but are “in control”, and even lead the males into “doing what they like” (PersCom Yuslan 2005). This dance-floor attitude has been appropriated by gays as a symbol of control, power and sexual freedom, and dancers of “queer *reggaetón*” continue the “queer *timba*” phenomenon of appropriating the image of the liberated, sexualised and powerful woman, and take it a step forward.

“How are we to read *regeton*¹²⁴, *perreo*, ‘sandwich dancing’, and ‘freak dancing’ [the U.S. name for *perreo*] if we approach gender as performed identity?” asks Fairley (2006:479). I would like to extend this question to the specific area of my investigation: How are we to read *reggaetón* dance moves in the gay or queer context, in which not only gender is a performed identity, but where identity is sometimes connoted by a performed gender?

Reggaetón’s provocative back-to-crotch *perreo* dance-style mimics anal intercourse. The female dancer dances with her backside toward the male and grinds her behind on the male’s crotch. As in salsa dancing, in *perreo* there is a division between the supposed male (penetrator) and female (penetrated) roles. They are “supposed” as these “gender” roles can be performed by either sex. I have seen cases where heterosexual couples exchange roles during the dance (and it happened with increasing frequency towards the end of my fieldwork), where symbolically, the female is the penetrator and the male is being anally penetrated. This motion takes the symbolism of female independence and economic “activeness” during the Special Period, as mentioned in the previous section about *timba*, even further. In gay *fiestas* same-sex *perreo* is danced by two men and in this case the sexual position mimicked and its strong “gay” connotation is obvious. While in “queer salsa,” as described in the previous section, the dancers sometimes switch from the conservative front-to-front position, to a “controversial” back-to-front “anal” position, and by doing so “performing” a liberated declarative yet subversive “gay identity.” In

¹²⁴ See footnote 19 about the different spellings.

reggaetón this position is the norm, and by embracing the genre and the dance in post-2000 gay *fiestas*, a statement is made regarding the normativity of gay sex and identity.

Other explicitly sexual dance moves associated with *reggaetón*, such as the “female” kneeling down close to the other’s crotch imitating oral sex, the “male” pulling the “female” by the hair or pretending to hit her, imitating S&M, and *yogurt*, a quick hit in the pelvic area between the couple imitating ejaculation (*yogurt*, or *crema*, is Cuban street-slang for ejaculated sperm) (Fairley 2006:482), also resonate with gay sex.

In gay *fiestas* I attended since 2005, I noticed that *perreo* has developed into a solo genre as well, where the pelvis and the backside are the focal point of the dance. As such, when performed by men, it became towards the end of my fieldwork the main Cuban homoerotic gay dance expression, “replacing [and borrowing from] rumba in impressing and attracting foreigners” (Omar, 24, *reguetonero and rumbero*, PersCom 2007). Indeed, during the last years of my fieldwork I saw many young, gay, Cubans “impressing” and “seducing” tourists in *fiestas* by dancing solo *perreo*. In recent years, YouTube has featured many homemade clips of young gay Cubans demonstrating solo *perreo* moves.¹²⁵ Those doing the filming are most likely tourist *amigos* (friends), or friends operating cameras given as *regalos* (gifts) by tourist-friends.

¹²⁵ See videos in Appendix II: 4,5,6.

Photo 6.14 *Reggaetón perreo* dance-style



Source: <http://www.taringa.net/posts/videos/11638689/Reggaeton-2010-2011-Lo-mejor.html> (accessed 8.6.2012)

Photos 6.15, 6.16. 6.17 *Gay perreo*



Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=amFJ86fiU2w> (accessed 8.6.2012)

The lyrics: Assigning new meanings.

Reggaetón lyrics constitute another site of “queer appropriation” of crude heterosexism. Through observing behaviour patterns of *reggaetón* dancers in gay *fiestas*, and following up these observations with PersComs, I have documented how the lyrics are widely enjoyed by gays as a parody on exaggerated sexuality, as an outlet for provocation and teasing, and as a form of the genre's Camp appeal. Some examples of typical crude expressions taken from popular *reggaetón* songs include: *dámelo* (give it to me), *métele* (stick it in), *chupa chupa* (suck suck), *coge mi tubo* (grab my pipe), *mami dame chocha* (mami, give me pussy), *te gusta que te pega y que pasa broche* (you like me to hit you and to pass my brush on you? “to pass the brush” meaning rubbing the penis against the orifices).¹²⁶ Originally meant in a heterosexist way, these lyrics receive a gay meaning in the *fiestas* and are sometimes accompanied by hand movements and loud singing along. *Reggaetón* lyrics are sexist but generally free from homophobia, in spite of the genre's roots in homophobia-driven rap and *reggae*, and its early days in the heterosexist/homophobic “underground rap” movement in Puerto Rico (Rivera 2009:12, 128).¹²⁷

One of the best examples of a “queer appropriation” of a hit is Calle 13's popular 2006 hit “Atrévete, te, te” (“dare, you, you”), which is addressed to a woman, but uses the expression “*salte del clóset*” (jump out of the closet) with words like:

Atrévete, te, te, te
Salte del closet,
destápate, quítate el esmalte
Deja de taparte que nadie va a retratarte
Levántate, ponte hyper
Préndete, sácale chispas al estárter
Préndete en fuego como un lighter
Sacúdete el sudor como si fueras un wiper
Que tu eres callejera, "Street Fighter"

¹²⁶ These examples are taken from various *reggaetón* songs. The last three examples are mentioned by Fairley (2006:475).

¹²⁷ One would hardly find *reggaetón* songs with a clear homophobic and “gay-bashing” message, such as occurs in Jamaican reggae, for example in Capleton's hit “More Prophet” saying: “bun battyman [burn gays]/ Dem same fire apply to di lesbian/ All boogaman [gays] and sodomites fi get killed...;” and in Buju Banton's hit (Boom boom boom) “Boom bye bye/Inna batty bwoy head” (shoot the gay guy's head).

Dare, you, you, you
 Jump out of the closet,
 Uncover yourself, take off the nail-polish,
 Stop covering yourself, so no one will take your picture
 Get up, get hyper
 Turn yourself, draw sparks from the starter
 Light yourself on fire like a lighter
 Shake off your sweat as if you were a wiper,
 'cause you're a street girl, a street fighter.¹²⁸

Gays adopted the phrase in its gay “coming out of the closet” connotation, and made the song a hit in *fiestas* in 2006–2007, singing loudly with the singer the catch phrase *Atrévete, te, te, te, salte del closet*. It is also interesting to note the gender ambiguity of the “multiplied” female figure in the video-clip where some of the “models” look like transgenders. (See in Appendix II/7).

Another example of both Cuban appropriation and queer appropriation in *reggaetón* is one of the genre’s first hits: “La gasolina” (Gasoline), written by the Puerto Rican musicians Daddy Yankee and Eddie Dee (2004).¹²⁹ Like “Atrévete, te, te”, the song lyrics relate to cars in a metaphoric way, a subject young Cubans are obsessed with, since very few can afford them (see photos 4.1 & 4.2 of the “rush hour” in the Malecón). When “La gasolina” was first heard in Cuba, most locals I met believed it to be Cuban.¹³⁰ It soon became a huge hit in the gay *fiestas* and was even adopted as a drag show favourite. The song tells the story of a girl who loves to go out and drive in her lover’s car (a fact immediately associated with *jineteras* in the Cuban context).

Zumbale mambo pa' que mis gatas prendan los motores
Zumbale mambo pa' que mis gatas prendan los motores
Zumbale mambo pa' que mis gats prendan los motores
Que se preparen que lo que viene es pa' que le den
(Duro!) Mamita, ya yo se que tu no te me vas a quitar
(Duro!) Lo que me gusta es que tu te dejas llevar
(Duro!) Todos los weekend'es ella sale a vacilar
(Duro!) Mi gata no para de janguear, porque...

¹²⁸ Source of lyrics: <http://community.livejournal.com/songlations/8636.html> (accessed 12.7.2010). My translation.

¹²⁹ Video: Appendix II/9

¹³⁰ Jan Fairley had a similar experience, and writes: “‘Gasolina’ circulated for at least a year in Cuba before various Cuban associates read in the newspaper it was actually Puerto Rican-U.S., and not Cuban in origin” (2006:476).

A ella le gusta la gasolina
(Dame mas gasolina!)
Como le encanta la gasolina
(Dame mas gasolina!)
A ella le gusta la gasolina
(Dame mas gasolina!)
Como le encanta la gasolina
(Dame mas gasolina!)

Shake it mambo, so my babes turn on the engines
Zumbale mambo so my babes turn on the engines
Zumbale mambo so my babes turn on the engines
So they will get ready for what I'll give them
(Hard) Mami, now I know you are not going to leave
(Hard) What I like is that you let yourself go
(Hard) All weekends she goes out to have fun
(Hard) My babe does not stop to hang out, because ...

She likes Gasoline
(Give me more gasoline!)

How much she likes gasoline
(Give me more gasoline!)

How much she likes gasoline
She likes Gasoline
(Give me more gasoline!)

The chorus: “Shake it mambo so that my ‘cat’ [*babe*] can turn on the engine,” and “She likes gasoline (give me more gasoline!),” are obviously sexual innuendo. In spite, or perhaps because of, this style’s being so overtly heterosexist, it was appropriated by gays and drag artistes for its raunchy, teasing sexual connotations. In addition to the sexual connotation there is a financial reading which makes this song very “Cuban”. In Cuba, the crisis and shortages in force since the start of the Special Period have given words like “gasoline” the sense of a rare commodity, a luxury, even. “I like gasoline” therefore stands for “I like the good things this regime cannot give me.” In this way, the sexual connotation is complemented by a financial reading which makes the song strikingly Cuban. In my main drag-shows fieldwork location, Bar de Las Estrellas (see Fig. 4.2, and Chapter 8), in 2006, I saw a drag queen miming the song repeatedly begging “Papi, give it to me,” while making sexual gestures towards a German tourist in the audience, referring to his penis as a “petrol pump,” mocking the stereotype of the Cuban sex-hungry *loca* begging to be “pumped” by a man, preferably a foreigner. At some point, while saying “give it to me,” she turned the gesture from sexual (indicating at her

backside) to financial, making money signs by rubbing her fingers. So, “La Gasolina” is an example of a song which received a distinctly queer slant in the gay *ambiente*, acquiring three layers of appropriated meaning: social, financial and sexual.

Marshall (2009:20) identifies symbolic social connotations in the song’s musical characteristics as well as in the lyrics. The term *matadores* is used in one of the song’s lines: “*En la pista nos llaman ‘los matadores’*” (“on the track, they call us “the matadors,” meaning both killers and bullfighters). The song has clear “harmonic movements and march-like figures associated with bullfight music” (ibid.).¹³¹

The use of *matadores* is associated with Spanish colonialism and oppression, and also with *machismo* (as per Marshall, ibid.). However, I suggest another layer of interpretation to this association, which reveals a homoerotic subtext. The world of bullfighters has long been associated in Hispanic gay culture with homoeroticism.¹³² In a drag performance of the song I saw at Bar de Las Estrellas in 2005, at the point the *matadores* line came up, the performer imitated in a Camp way a feminine *matador* waving a red cloth at an invisible bull, and then running away from it.

House: Gay and *internacional*

Evolving from disco, house music is a genre of up-tempo electronic (120 -140 bpm) dance music that originated in gay Black and Latino clubs in Chicago in the early 1980s,¹³³ as a mix of “old disco classics, new Eurobeat pop and synthesised beats into a frantic high- energy amalgamation of recycled soul” (Cosgrove 1989). It is characterised by disco-influenced sampled symphonic sweeps and soul-diva vocals, and a repetitive “thumping” electronic rhythm produced by drum machines or samplers. As in the case of disco, after starting in gay clubs, house music soon crossed over to the mainstream dancefloors and became the most popular global dance genre in the 1990s, a major

¹³¹ To demonstrate this musical association App. III includes an audio version of “La gasolina” which was popular in Cuba (7), followed by “El matador”, a popular bullfighting music piece (8). Note the similarity.

¹³² Examples from the world of cinema are Pedro Almodóvar’s 1986 film and Richard Shepard’s 2005 film, both called “Matador”.

¹³³ Source: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/273088/house> (accessed 1.8.09).

consistent of urban soundscape, mass-commodified and “shaking off some of its subcultural (homosexual) connotations in the process” (Amico 2006:134). Still, despite “crossing over,” house remained a “de facto soundtrack of the queer nation” (Hermes 2000:147).

In Cuba during the late 1980s, the music scene was virtually isolated from current foreign dance and underground influences such as House. Until then, “international music” in Cuba still meant 1970s funk, jazz, and soul (with local fusion groups such as Irakere). In a way, Cubans were exposed to house and Latino house¹³⁴ only in the 1990s, via personal imports from Miami. During the research period, I heard significantly more house in gay *fiestas* than in straight *fiestas*, where hip-hop was favoured. I discussed this with two DJs, Diego, a Cuban who plays in both gay and straight *fiestas*, and Esteban, a Cuban living in Miami since 1985 who visits Cuba often, and is well-absorbed in the U.S. dance scene (PersComs 2005). They both confirmed my conclusion, based on attending many *fiestas* and conversations with *fiesta*-goers, that in Cuba in the mid-to-late 1990s, similar to the U.S. in the early 1980s, house was considered “gay music” whereas hip-hop was “straight”.

I also noted the share of house music played in the big public gay *fiestas* to be approximately 40% (of which 60% was English-language US House, and 40% was Spanish-Language Latino House). In the smaller home *fiestas*, there was a lower share of house (totaling 30%), of which only a third was English-language U.S. House, and the rest was Spanish-language Latino house.

Considering the fact that house is the most popular non-Latino genre played in the *fiestas*, and that, unlike the other genres features in this chapter, it is not played on radio in Cuba, nor performed live, I thought at first that the popularity of house in Havana's gay *fiestas* was related to its global association with gay dancefloors. However, I was surprised to find out that only very few of my informants knew that house was considered in the U.S. and Europe to be “gay music.” Most of my informants were surprised and

¹³⁴ “Latino-house” emerged in the U.S. in the mid 1980s with some house productions using Spanish lyrics, aimed particularly to the Hispanic community, and developed into an important sub-genre of house music, mixing house with Latin American musical elements.

amused to hear that. After much questioning and counter-checking with DJs and journalists, I came to the conclusion that the popularity of house music in the gay *fiestas* in Havana has to do more with two factors: internationality, a central theme in the aspirations of Cuban gays, and an aesthetic/ musical gay sensitivity.

Many of my *fiesta* informants mentioned the house music played in the *fiestas* as a proof of their internationality, belonging to the world. *Internacional* is an important concept in Cuban gay discourse tied to modernity and globalism, related both to cultural identity and to sexual behavior. *Internacional* is a term used in Cuban gay parlance for “sexually versatile,” both active and passive, a concept which is connected to modern gay identity rather than the old-fashioned Cuban *maricón/buggarón* dichotomy based on sexual role (see Appendix IV).

Yordenis, one of my regular *fiesta* buddies and informants, expressed a view I heard from many other *fiesta* informants:

When I dance house I feel I belong to a gay universe. It is also the music that *extranjeros* can understand and participate in. When it is Cuban music and *reggaetón* they like to watch us [Cubans] dancing or participate in a clumsy way, but with house they feel at home, and when the DJ plays a house track they join in, and I feel I belong to a gay world, together with them. We are the same. house unites us and marks us as world gays, *internacional* [smiles and winks, hinting at the double meaning of the term] (Yordenis, 27, PersCom 2003).

Conclusion

In Special Period Havana, notwithstanding its unique circumstances, or most probably because of it, dance music has played a major role in establishing and framing a gay/queer identity, obtaining (mostly “imagined”) power, and maintaining the *ambiente*. It has created a clandestine, safe space for the expression of gay identity and social interaction, in a society which did not, otherwise, provide nor allow such spaces.

This chapter introduced the phenomenon of the *fiestas de diez pesos*, clandestine dance music parties held at weekends, either in private homes or in isolated and remote open air spaces, where during the resrach period Havana’s gays could socialise freely, dance, express their identity and interact with gay tourists. The *fiestas* phenomenon comprises of music, space/location and psychology, and its uniqueness is in the connection and relations between these spheres, being a perfect example of the music-

place-space connection (Whiteley, Bennett, and Hawkins 2004). As described in this chapter, in the *fiesta*, experience the location means nothing without the music, but so is the music without the location and the event.

The chapter commenced with a detailed description of the *fiestas de diez pesos* and of the changes that occurred in them during the 12-years span on the resequarche period, strongly connected to the social changes taking place in Special Period Havana.

From a description of the *fiestas* the chapter then moved into a detailed description of the four main musical genres played and danced in the *fiestas* and the particular ways in which their dance moves, as well as lyrics, were “queer appropriated”. Three of which are considered heterosexual and local--*salsa*, *timba* and Cuban *reggaetón*, and one is “foreign” and associated with gay culture--house music. Another way to categorise these genres is by dividing into two chronological and global/local groups: both global genres, house being of non-Latino origin, and *salsa*, pan-Latino, in spite of its Cuban music roots, are also pre-Special Period genres, popular in gay clubs and parties around the world. *Timba* and Cuban *reggaetón* are Special Period local genres, representing the timeframe and place axes of this thesis.

Acoustic qualities often reflect social circumstances (Cohen 1994:129). In our case, both *timba* and *reggaetón*, in spite of being very different musically and catering to different tastes,¹³⁵ have socially and stylistically much in common. The character of the music, intense and edgy, described as “macho” and “nervous” (Juan de Marcos Gonzáles, Interview 2003) reflect the unique conditions, the tension and resistance of life during the Special Period. The typical provocative dance styles of *despelote* and *perreo* which started in *timba* and were absorbed into *reggaetón*, express outspoken liberated female sexuality, a reflection of the new economy according to Fairley (2004, 2006) and Perna (2005), and in our case were “queer appropriated” and used by gays to express outspoken liberated gay sexuality and availability. The “metrosexual” image of *reggaetón* artists represents Cuban male vanity in 2000s Havana, and adds a certain license for men to show feminine qualities and sexual ambiguities.

Following this description chapter, the next chapter is dedicated to analysis of what was

¹³⁵ Afficionados of each genre usually reject the other--*timba* lovers referring to *reggaetón* as “superficial, mechanic and cheap,” and *reggaetón* lovers seeing *timba* as “too Black” and “archaic” (various PersComs 2003).

described here – from the connection between dance music to gay identity, via the dancefloor behavior, to a queer reading of the typical musical elements of the different genres, showing how the *fiestas* scene and its music provide a much needed space for gay identity.

Chapter 7

Fiestas de diez pesos, Part II: “Dancing identity” (analysis)

You ask about identity? Come to the fiesta, when I am there I *dance* my identity. Yes, we don't have other [legitimate] ways here to express our gay identity, so we dance our identity (Alejandro, 27, PersCom 1999).

Introduction

Following the description of the gay *fiestas* scene and the music heard therein, this chapter will analyse the scene and its various social and psychological components from human behavior to musical forms. In this chapter, I will examine how identity, sexuality, gender, Cubanness, gayness, interaction, psychology, ritual behaviour, collectiveness, aestheticism, and “gay sensibility” are reflected in, or rather embedded in, the phenomenon. This analysis chapter is divided to five sections dealing with the social, behavioural, psychological, visual and musical aspects of the scene.

The chapter begins with a general overview of the connection between gay identity and dance music, emphasising the social aspects of gay dance music culture. It then “zooms in” on the gay dance music scene in Havana, and its unique social characteristics such as *jineterismo*, and its capitalistic and commercial nature.

The comparison of dance music scenes to religion, and the behaviour in dance parties to ritual behavior are popular themes in recent researchers of the rave and electronic dance music (EDM) culture. In this chapter, I focus this analogy on the unique character of the Havana gay *fiesta* scene, where another embedded cultural element of ritual behavior exists--that of Afro-Cuban religion. The psychological aspects of the *fiestas* scene and the way they help form and maintain a “gay identity” in a society with no official gay scene will be analysed through observation, personal conversations and mini-survey questionnaires.

The interaction between locals and tourists is a major motivating force in the *ambiente* and the *fiestas* provide the most fertile ground for this interaction. In this chapter, I will examine one of the main features and catalysts of this interaction, taking place on the dancefloor: the fascination of foreigners with the way Cuban men dance and with what I call “the gay Cuban dancing body.”

The last section of this chapter is dedicated to identifying “gay sensibility” elements in musical characteristics of music played in the *fiestas*, and framing them in a global “gay musicality” context relying on previous researches in this area. As in the section dedicated to ritual behavior, the musical analysis section is also looking at comparisons with elements relating to Afro-Cuban ritual music. This illustrates how the unique character of the Havana gay *fiestas* scene, as well as the *ambiente* in general, lies in the juxtaposition of homosexuality/gayness, globalism and localism/Cubanness.

Gay dance music and its social aspects

Gender and sexuality displays, from “cock rock” to Madonna and Lady Gaga, have been a hot topic in popular music studies since the early 1990s (Frith and McRobbie 1990 [1978], Walser 1993:114-17, Jarman-Ivens 2006, 2007 and more). While genres as +rock and hip-hop are associated with heterosexual masculinity and pop ballads with heterosexual femininity (Dyer 1995 [1979]:411), 1970s disco and dance music styles evolving from it are associated with gay lifestyle, culture, and identity.

Disco music originally emerged in the 1970s among gay, Black, and Latino communities in the United States as a counterculture alternative to heterosexual white rock (Sagert 2007:203,204). In spite of its cross-over and mainstream popularity during the late 1970s, it remained a global emblem of gay culture and became the prototype of other gay-associated dance music genres of the 1980s such as Hi NRG (early 1980s) and house music (late 1980s). It also has a “Latin” connection - emerging among Latino communities in the U.S. and being an essential ingredient in salsa. This gay / Latino /dance-music triangle has other dimensions of association as well, which are essential in understanding the appeal and importance of the *fiestas* phenomenon, as a gay space. I

will now look at some physical and social aspects of disco mentioned in gay studies literature, not in connection to disco music *per se*, but as a clue for understanding and finding similar concepts and ideas in both the gay dance music phenomenon in general, and the Cuban gay *fiestas* scene in particular.

In a 1979 groundbreaking essay titled "In defense of disco," one of the first to take disco seriously as a representation of an emerging gay consciousness,¹³⁶ Richard Dyer talks about the genre's "whole body" eroticism, which he sees as a male homosexual expression, as opposed to the masculine/heterosexual phallic "thrusting" eroticism of rock and the feminine romantic "disembodied" eroticism of pop songs (1995 [1979]:407-415). I argue that this whole body dance experience does not only correspond with a gay sensibility, but also with a Latino one. All the Cuban and pan-Latino dance music genres featured in this chapter--salsa, *timba*, and *reggaetón* are whole body genres. This is expressed in the way of dancing, using all parts of the body, but also in the polyrhythmic nature of the music, featuring different rhythms; that is, movements carried out simultaneously. A phallic thrust, which Dyer associates with Rock, is also incorporated in all these genres' dance style but not as a sole, isolated, or even primary physical expression, but as part of a whole body synchronised movement system, from head to toe, with the whole torso (including the bottom) being the focal points of the dance rather than the phallus.

The gay disco experience was not only physical or aesthetic, but also had many social aspects. The New Grove Encyclopedia article about Lesbian and Gay music (the unedited version), notes about the changes occurring in gay music since the 1970s: "[A] notable sphere of queer interest and sponsorship has been the dance floor... gay men and sometimes lesbians gyrated and celebrated 'family' in safe queer spaces" (Brett and Wood 2002). The concept of family, or rather an alternative family, in gay communities constantly appears with different connotations and is one of the common central themes of this thesis, particularly as it relates to spaces.

In addition to "family" being celebrated on gay dancefloors, freedom was also an often-expressed sentiment. "I feel free here" is a sentence I kept hearing from my *fiesta*-

¹³⁶ This was first published in *Gay Left Magazine* (UK), Issue 8, 1979:20-23, and then appeared in various academic publications.

goers informants whenever I asked them about their *fiesta* experience. Of course this freedom is only a “fantasy of liberation” as described by Melechi (1993:37) in the context of youth dance cultures, an imaginary form of resistance and liberation (St John 2006:2).

Disco as “gay dance music”, according to Dyer is a bearer of “subversive potential as well as reactionary implications” (1995 [1979]:410). Part of this “subversive potential” is embedded in the genre’s erotic, romantic, and materialistic characteristics (both narrative/lyrical and musical) which are “not only key ambiguities within gay male culture, but have also traditionally proved stumbling blocks to socialists” (ibid.). Furthermore, “disco is held to be irredeemably capitalist” (Dryer 1995 [1979]:408). It is hedonistic and nurtures capitalistic ideologies, an interest in commodities and their exchange values (ibid.).

The linkage of “gay identity” to capitalism is the subject of a groundbreaking essay by John D’Emilio (1983) who claims that the emergence of gay identity

is associated with the relations of capitalism; it has been the historical development of capitalism--more specifically, its free labor system--that has allowed large number of men and women in late twenty century to call themselves gay, to see themselves as part of a community of similar men and women” (1983:102).

In Cuba capitalism is considered subversive of course, however, since the onslaught of the Special Period the island has been going into a process of “capitalisation” which is particularly evident in Havana. The evolution of gay identity in Cuba and of Havana’s gay *ambiente* is undoubtedly connected to this process, and the subversiveness of capitalism resonates with the subersiveness associated with homosexuality. The free labor system associated with capitalism which is slowly being introduced to Havana as a result of the financial crisis, resonates with the freedom to choose your sexuality and way of life. This gay/capitalist link is nurtured by, and nurtures, the gay *fiestas*. This nurturance is present in the way the *fiestas* operate as a capitalist enterprise, through their hedonistic and materialistic nature involving anything from fashion brands to "subversive" music, to *jineterismo* and tourist/local relations, and, ultimately, to the space it provides for the consolidation of gay identity

In Cuban culture the status of dance music, and sexual-orientation associated with it, were traditionally different from disco. *Música bailable* has always, since the early 20th Century, been the most popular form of Cuban music, and strongly associated with

heterosexuality, demonstrating and setting clear gender roles. Unlike the Eurocentric approach towards dance music, in Cuba popular dance music is considered a *macho* domain. Most of the musicians are male, and dancing in Cuba, even in the “old days” reinforced the virility of the dancer. As Juan Rodríguez, a forty-five year-old Cuban dance teacher now living in Miami, comments:

For the white Americans [non-Hispanic] and Europeans very good dancers must be gay. If someone is unusually acrobatic or expressive in the dance floor, he must be gay or have something "feminine" about him. In Cuba it's the opposite; for a male to be a great dancer is a very macho thing. Look at *rumberos* [rumba dancers], the movements and acrobatics they do in the *columbia* [a rumba dance performed as a male solo], the more expressive or even Camp they are, the more they are considered masculine and attractive to women. Also, for us dance is connected with religion, unlike the [north, Christian] Americans who used to consider dance as blasphemous and anti-religious. You go to Cuban clubs and all the men dance, you go to a white club and all the gays dance, while the very straight macho men don't dance. (PersCom 2001).

Homosexual subcultures in Cuba and in the Latino world need to create their own queer spaces within the general, heterosexual, dance music-scape. Rey who investigated the gay parties scene among Latina lesbians in the U.S. writes, “[t]he meaning of improvised social dancing produced in queer club culture represents more than a metaphor for sexual mobility, but a process of contestation where minoritarian subjects negotiate the emergence of community” (2006:125,126). In the eyes of the outsider (*extranjeros*, in our case) the gay dance music *fiestas* in Cuba are a doubly contested phenomenon, as dance music is associated both with gay culture and with *Cubanidad*.

“Dance music is crucial to both Cubans’ self-presentation and outsiders’ perception of them” writes Perna (2005a:5). In spite of being so crucial or because of it, dance music has also collided with the revolution's principles and ideologies, which therefore marginalised it. “Popular Cuban [dance] music has always been a marginal music [in revolutionary Cuba],” says Charanga Habanera’s David Calzado (interviewed by Moore 2006:110). Moore explains: “Calzado’s comments suggest that dance music represents a potentially oppositional space, one in which politics and Marxist ideology are generally de-emphasised and pleasure, physicality, and other factors predominate” (2006:110). Indeed, popular dance music has always been associated with license and pleasure, “two

notions that – as Michel Foucault has pointed out – represent both a site of political control and a site of resistance to it” (Perna 2005a:6).

With the loosening-up of cultural control, and the emergence of capitalism, consumerism and social resistance that characterised the Special Period, dance music flourished, bringing new innovative ideas and a wealth of activity and new bands to a scene that in the view of some authors had been stagnant since the onslaught of the Revolution (Manuel 1987:166). The emergence of *timba* in the early 1990s brought a whole new life into Cuban dance music, and created a strong connection between the dancefloor and the the period’s socio-psychological changes.

There are some parallels to be drawn between the regime’s attitude towards popular dance music and towards homosexuality. Both have been marginalised, condemned, and later embraced and hailed when they served the purpose of flattering the regime’s progressive stance, “loosening up” its grip on the frustrated population, and generating foreign empathy and currency. In 2008 (coincidentally or not, the same year of the first anti-homophobia gay campaign), the 50th anniversary of the Revolution was celebrated with free dance music concerts rather than classical, ballet, or traditional *nueva trova*, as in previous state celebrations.

Fiesta behaviour as ritual behaviour

In 1997, I went to a home *fiesta* right after attending a *toque*¹³⁷ in a gay friendly *santería* house. What struck me immediately when entering the *fiesta* was a similarity in the participants’ behaviour and vibe between the two, supposedly very different, events. In the *bembé*, the music (drumming and chanting) was loud, rhythmic, repetitive, hypnotic, and when things warmed up, the participants were dancing/moving ecstatically, some in a stage of near-possession, or different level of trance¹³⁸ with the dancers’ hands sometimes collectively lifted up and eyes shut or in a fixed gaze moving from the floor to

¹³⁷ Afro-Cuban religion musical ceremony in honour of the *orishas*, the deities. See Chapter 9.

¹³⁸ Trance and intoxication via ritual music has been thoroughly researched (Rouget 1985[1980]) and will be discussed in the context of *santería* music (Chapter 9).

the ceiling. Among the non-participating audience, i.e. those who were not concentrating on the dancing or drumming, and some of the dancers, I noticed some “gaydar” activity and eye contact established between male participants who looked gay.

When I later entered the *fiesta*, the experience was strikingly similar: the DJ was playing a series of loud catharsis songs--high-bpm repetitive electronic house tracks.-- The dancers were moving ecstatically, hands collectively lifted up in the air in catharsis sections of the music, some eyes with fixed gazes at the floor or the ceiling, while those standing by were “gaydaring.”

In the many *fiestas* I attended, I have witnessed similar behaviour patterns associated with ritual expressions, such as common dancing and movements, collective “hands up in the air,” ecstatic trance-like *despelote*, and even imitations of Afro-Cuban secular (rumba) and religious dances. Furthermore, during numerous PersComs, I heard many informants comparing the *fiesta* experience to a religious experience, using expressions such as “trance,” “transformation,” “ecstasy,” “losing one’s identity,” or “gaining new identity,” “conversion,” and others.

The analogy between dance parties and religious rituals has been thoroughly discussed in numerous publications in the context of EDMC (electronic dance music culture) and the rave culture.¹³⁹ Researchers have pinpointed the aspects of festal and ritual behaviour in the rave phenomenon. In this section I will refer to some of these works and relate them to my experience at the Havana gay *fiestas* scene.

St. John who looks at the electronic trance music and rave scene, and sees clubbers as parts of “neo-tribes” claims that “as a performative context, the dance experience approximates the *festal*, or ‘festive ritual’... a timeless zone, a space of disorder and indeterminacy where dancers (neophytes and experienced) are licensed to experiment with their *other selves*...” (2006:5, 6). Schütze compared Carnavalesque behaviour in the Bahian carnival and in rave culture and reached the conclusion that in both “[a]n open process of dynamic incorporation in which identity is never fixed but always open to transmutations,” modulating “normative modes of subjectivation and permit[ing] the

¹³⁹ Readhead 1995[1993]; Thornton 1995, 1996; Frith 1996; Reynolds 1997; Pini 1997, 2001; Rietveld 1998, 2004; Fritz 1999; Sylvan 2002; Gauthier 2004, 2005; St. John 2004, 2006; and, more.

experimentation of novel forms of subjectivity” (2001:162). Those descriptions and comparisons resonate with similarities I found between *santería* rituals I attended (chapter 9) and “ritual behaviour” in the *fiestas*.

St John takes the analogy further and compares EDMC to religion, not only in relation to the ritual and festal expressions and to elements of trance and ecstasy in the dance experience, but to subjectivity, corporeality, the vibe and the tribal aspects of EDM culture (2004, 2006). Sylvan claims that the rave subculture functions “in the same way as a religious community, albeit in an unconscious and postmodern way” (2002:4), and Huston describes the dancing experience in these parties as a source of “spiritual healing” equivalent to a conversion experience” (Huston 1999, 2000, in St. John 2006:4).

In spite of the similarities in the dancefloor expressions described above and the psychological feeling of belonging expressed by many of my *fiesta* crowd informants, there is a major difference between this “spiritual healing/conversion experience in the context of the Eurocentric EDMC/rave scene and that of the Cuban gay *fiestas* scene. Whereas in the former the experience is strongly related to drug use, especially MDMA (ecstasy) and other chemical mood enhancers, the *fiestas* in Havana are mostly drug free. The spiritual/conversion experience is still strong and, based on numerous PersComs and observation, I argue that in the case of the *fiestas* it is triggered and enhanced by two social/cultural factors: the initiation process into a gay world, and the cultural closeness to African religious rituals.

As for the first factor, in a society where the gay scene operates clandestinely, the process of initiation into the gay world by attending the *fiestas* can be seen as a process of conversion. In the case of new arrivals on the scene, in a society with no organised gay activity, attending a first *fiesta* is the initiation into the gay world. For those who were initiated already but live in the closet, the *fiesta* means a process of re-identification with their gayness.

Gay dance parties, especially in societies where gay life is restricted and clandestine, provide the affirmation of the dancers’ gay identity and the re-enforcement of their self-esteem (Lewis and Ross 1995:125.). These parties are the subcultural gateway for some men to cross the social boundaries which in turn reinforced or initiated their gay identity

(ibid. 131,132), and they therefore possess “the qualities of demarcated *thresholds* through which initiates pass” (St John 2006:5).

In Cuba, the concept of initiation is particularly powerful. It is a major concept in *santería* worship which revolves around a chain of initiation ceremonies.(Brown 2003). Some of my informants described their first *fiesta* experiences as an initiation, a rite of passage (Van Gennep 2004[1960]) into the gay world:

When I went for the first time to parque Lenin [the location of many big outdoor *fiestas* in the late 1990s], I felt just like when I had been to my first *santería* ceremony. I was nervous, excited, and felt like entering into a new world, a secret, like being part of the secret. I’ll never forget this feeling... It is just like an initiation. Before I was one thing,after I was another. I became more mature, more confident. I realised I was not alone but part of a community (Anier, 31, PersCom 2006).

According to Van Gennep (1960; Lewis and Ross 1995:136), there are three stages in rites of passage (both ritualistic and social): separation, transition and incorporation. Observations and description from my informants of their first *fiesta* experiences clearly portray these stages. First, the *separation* from the previous, straight friends and sometimes even family (and hometown, in the case of gay migrants from the provinces). A *transition* period follows and consists of hanging around the Malecón, hesitating and being “in between,” going to the first *fiestas*, learning the group ritual behavior, from the dance movements to the adoption of mannerisms - camping up, flirtations , et cetera., and oscillating between one’s “straight” past and the new discovered gay life. Then comes the *incorporation* in the scene and the gay social milieu, usually after a few *fiestas* and making new friends in the *ambiente*.

The second factor mentioned above, bringing the *fiesta* experience socially closer to a religious experience is its cultural closeness to African religious rituals, especially *santería*. Sylvan comments that rave culture in general bares a “hidden religious sensibility” originating in West African possession religion, and arriving to white EDMC via African-American secular music (like blues and RnB) appropriated by white youth who were raised “with an experience of the West African spiritual sensibility, albeit in a radical transformed context” (2002:68). In our case, the way from this West African sensibility to the dancefloor is much shorter, more direct, and less radically transformed. In many of the *fiestas* I attended, I noticed dancers whose dance moves were imitating or “quoting” Afro-Cuban *santería* and secular (rumba) moves, and indeed many of them

confirmed they intentionally or unintentionally used rumba and even *orisha* possession moves when dancing in the *fiestas* (PersComs: Yuslan 2005, Omar, 2007, Anier 2007 and more).

Landau mentions other socio-psychological aspects of dance music culture as ritual behavior relating to conversion and transformation. His work addresses the shading of identity, ideology and language in the raving experience which brings "subconscious knowledges of unity and alterity (not to mention genderless sexual specificity)...quite different from those of self-reflective thought" (2004:121). Gilbert and Pearson discuss an "ecstatic displacement" taking part in dance parties which, among other things affects amounts of "standing outside the discourses which fix gendered identity" (1999:104). In the gay *fiestas* "standing outside the discourses of fixed gendered identity" is not only part of the dance experience and the "ecstatic displacement" it evokes, but an intentional part of queer discourse which is only enriched and executed by the ecstatic experience.

In addition to the ritual behaviour and the spiritual experience of conversion and initiation, there is a social group aspect to the analogy between the dance party culture and religion. St. John mentions the "liminal" nature of the rave scene and the ecstatic experience as the trigger to the collective, "tribal" feel (2006:9). According to Maria Pini, the "ecstatic moment" is "a release from monadic territory--an outburst which represents less the escape of mind from body than the absorption of the individual in a wider body" (1997:124). This leads to a deeper discussion about the collective body and bonding, communal soul, and spiritual intimacy of the rave experience (Rietveld 2004:50).

St. John describes a process of shedding individual identity which leads to the creation and amalgamation of a new collective identity. In rave culture, this collective identity is known as "vibe," which he describes as a "primary source of belonging and identity" (2006:9-12). In the *fiestas de diez pesos* this collective "vibe" is experienced by the shedding of the day-to-day straight identity and the false and enforced "collective identity" of socialist Cuba, and the creation of a "gay vibe," a collective identity out of choice and solidarity.

"Tribalism" is another concept mentioned in works about rave culture (Gore 1997:50-67), which in the context of the gay *fiestas* takes on another identity-driven dimension. Tribalism and secrecy are typical collective behaviour patterns for groups in

crisis. Lewis and Ross applied psychologist Luigi Zoja's work on ritual behaviour among subcultures in crisis in the context of drug users (1989) to their research of the inner-Sydney gay community in the AIDS crisis during the early 1990s (1995). Gay scenes in non-tolerant societies and regimes where homosexuality is either illegal or marginalised and oppressed (as is the case in Cuba during the research period), are also "subcultures in crisis." Thus, social gatherings such as parties need to be kept secret and therefore obtain value as a shared secret. The secrecy and liminality of both the late 1980s UK rave parties and the 1990s Havana gay *fiestas* are affected by and affect their legal (or in fact, illegal) status and the way they are conceptualised by the establishment. According to St. John in the case of the rave culture, "the parent culture waged a moral panic, [and] the scene was legislated against" (2006:2). In Special Period Havana, the ongoing police harassment and regular *redadas* were a major aspect of the scene and its clandestine nature. Secrecy and alternative family (a kind of tribalism) are two major social aspects of the *ambiente* and its different spaces and, therefore, two of the central themes in this thesis.¹⁴⁰

Finally, whereas ritual and festal behavior and ecstatic experiences can be seen as irrational and unintentional, the *fiestas* phenomenon holds much intention, meaning, and purpose. Redhead (1993), in one of the first attempts to make sense of the UK rave parties phenomenon, claims that youth cultures hold an "implosion of meaning", based on Baudrillard postmodernist theory, and possess meaning, purpose, and significance for their participants (St. John 2006:1; Redhead 1993).¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ In Chapter 9, for example, I discuss secrecy as both a virtue of *santería* and of homosexuality.

¹⁴¹ The subject of "meaning in dancing" whether inherent or attributed is further discussed by Ward in an essay titled: "Dancing around Meaning (and the Meaning around Dance)" (1997:3-20).

“Fiesta-psychology” survey

As for the psychological level of the *fiesta* experience, during my conversations with *fiesta*-goers, I kept asking the questions “What does the *fiesta* make you feel?” and “What is the reason you go to the *fiestas*?” Interestingly, most of the answers were not “to hear music” or “to dance,” but were at psychological and social levels: “it makes me feel I belong; I am not on my own,” “it makes me feel free,” “it helps me meet people and make friends,” and “it makes us [gays] feel protected.”

I extracted some themes which were constantly repeated and constructed a small questionnaire in which 25 respondents aged 20-30 were asked to mark the four options (out of ten) that they most identify with in order to complete the sentence “I go to the *fiesta* because...”. In order to monitor changes in perception over time, I repeated the same survey with a similar age group seven years later.

The options (based on the most common answers I received before compiling the survey) were:

1. I feel I belong to a gay community” (group identity - key word: belonging)
2. I feel free to express myself as a gay man (personal gay identity - key word: freedom)
3. I feel protected (key word: security)
4. it’s a way to meet other gays (key word: interaction)
5. it’s a way of entertainment/fun (key word: fun)
6. it’s a way to relax, to release tension/stress (key word: relaxation)
7. it’s a way to escape day-to-day reality (escapism. key word: escaping)
8. it’s an opportunity to hear new music (key word: music)
9. it’s an opportunity to dance (key word: dance)
10. other

In the first of the two mini surveys in 1998, the top results were: freedom (20%), interaction (19%), belonging (18%), and escaping (15%).¹⁴² In the second mini survey in

¹⁴² The percentage is calculated out of 100 answers all together (25 respondents x 4 marked options).

2005, the top results were: belonging (19%), freedom (17%), interaction (17%), escaping (12%).

The results were very similar in the four top answers despite the seven-year gap and the economic and social changes that took place in Havana during this period, with a small decrease in “freedom” (-3%), and the need to escape (-3%), which can be explained by the slight improvement in the regime’s tolerance of the gay community and the decrease in restrictions inflicted on gay expression. Those four top answers were the source of the major themes of this thesis as relected in its title: identity, interaction and escapism.

The answers given to the mini survey questions correspond with observations made by psychologists in relation to dance party subcultures in other societies. Based on previous sources on dance party subcultures (Hanna 1987, Evans 1988, Wotherspoon 1991), Lewis and Ross note that gay dance parties have “traditionally provided individuals and communities in crisis with an adaptive (and often instant) psychological coping mechanism [with the] ...stress from living in an often alienating, homonegative environment (1995:124). The parties also provide gays with “a social safety valve where they could ventilate their accumulated anxiety and aggression from living in a society that had traditionally devalued their lifestyle” (Herek 1984 in Lewis and Ross 1995: 130, 131).

Heelas and Seel claim that the dance music culture constitutes a psychological “secondary institution,” as it

shift[s] from ‘life-as’ or ‘dictated life’ (life lived in terms of institutionalized or traditionalized formations provided by ‘primary institutions’) to ‘*subjective life*’ or ‘*expressive life*’ (life lived in terms of personal, intimate, psychological, somatic, interior experiences *catered for* by ‘secondary institutions’) (2003:239, in St. John 2006:12).

This “secondary institution” provides a sense of liberation from the chains of the primary institution, an "active communal force, a feeling, a rhythm that is created by the mix of dancers, the balance of loud music, the effects of darkness and light, the energy. Everything interlocks to produce a powerful sense of liberation”. (Sommer 2001/2002:73).

The *fiestas de diez pesos* form a “secondary institution” with its own codes, hierarchy, interaction system, and liberated forms of expression. It engenders a sense of

liberation from the chains of the restricted behavior “outside” as enforced by the “primary institutions,” i.e. the Cuban authorities, the police, and Cuban society. Yankiel (24) tells me, “when we are here in the fiesta it is a different world, a different system, from outside “a la calle” [in the street]. Here we (Cuban gays) are openly gay, have control and are expressing ourselves freely” (PersCom 1999). Sylvan, following a Turnerian logic, talks about the *communitas* on the dancefloor which can serve as “a model for an alternative to mainstream society” (2002:146-157). The *ambiente* is indeed an alternative to mainstream society, with its own rules, hierarchy, interaction modes, codes of behaviors, and musical spaces, such as the *fiestas*, which are its foundation and building blocks.

The gay Cuban dancing body and the sensualisation of the dancefloor

The relationship between music and the body has been tackled from various angles in recent years, and so has the relationship between body, music, space and identity. In her essay, “The embodiment of salsa,” Patria Román-Velázquez looks at the relationship between body and Latino identity among salsa musicians in London “as a two-fold process whereby bodies are experienced through music, when present, and whereby music (again, when present) is experienced through our bodies” (2005:296).

Dance music is, according to Román-Velázquez, based on McClary (1991) “mediated through genre-specific codes and through specific social contexts and other socially constructed meanings...” (Román-Velázquez 2005:296). McClary challenges the perception that music is a universal language, as it holds cultural-specific codes, it “changes over time, and it differs with respect to geographical locale” (1991:25). Not only culture is coded in dance music, but sexuality as well. The “sexed body” as something socially and culturally constructed rather than a biological entity is a concept strongly rooted in queer theory, and is addressed by Jeffrey Weeks (1986,1992), Judith Butler (1990), Chris Shilling (1993), Mike Featherstone et al. (1991), and Pasi Falk (1994). Román-Velázquez builds her observation on this queer theory principle: “there is no intrinsic relationship between sexed bodies, gender and sexuality, as these are

culturally constructed, communicated, and experienced” (2006:297). Observing the dancers in the gay *fiestas*, I identified a culturally constructed “gay Cuban dancing body” that communicates both “gayness” and “Cubanness” to fellow Cuban gays and to the foreign onlookers.

The “gay Cuban dancing body” is a term I coined based on “the dancing *mulata*” iconic image in Cuban culture (Ruf 1997), and in Brazilian culture (Amado 2001:94). The image portrays flamboyant sexuality on the dancefloor (ibid.), but also social undercurrents of danger, witchcraft and sorcery, and exploitation by the white conquerors. The “gay Cuban dancing body”, likewise, portrays flamboyant sexuality, a mixture of Latin *machismo*, athleticism, sexual provocation, sexual ambiguity, liberation, and Camp. The “foreign gaze” is essential to the construction of this “gay Cuban dancing body.” The increasing presence of tourists in dance-music venues in Special Period Havana has substantially contributed to the sensualisation of Cuban dance music. As Baker puts it “Cuba defines itself like few other countries through dance, which looms large in both popular and tourist-oriented images of the country” (Baker 2006:240). Throughout history, dance music in Cuba has been connected to sensuality and to sexual innuendoes and interaction among locals, or between locals and foreigners. “Feelings and ideas about sexuality and sex roles...take shape in dance,” writes dance anthropologist Hanna (1988:xiii). She adds: “These visual models of which dancer (male or female) performs what, when, how, why, either alone, or with or to another dancer reflect and also challenge society’s expectations for each sex’s specific activities, whether dominance patterns or mating strategies” (ibid.)¹⁴³ However, this is not always clearcut and can be an interpretation of the viewer rather than the dancer.

As Hanna indicates, dance most often “calls attention to one of the two types of human bodies – male or female” (1988:xiv). But what about the queerisation of this dichotomy? That is, men who dance ‘as women’, take (often exaggerated) female roles, or, in fact, create, as I claim here a new “body”--the “gay dancing body?”

My own observations in Havana and those of Ringdal in New York (1991), and Lewis and Ross in Sydney (1995), are only the tip of the iceberg and call for a much

¹⁴³ As demonstrated in the previous chapter in relation to the queer versions of salsa, *timba*, and *reggaetón*.

further cross-cultural investigation of the queer dancing body. There are populist conventions and stigmas about the body language of gay men on and off the dancefloor, associated with feminine, “camping it up” and “over-the-top” gestures. Ringdal who looked at gays in a New York disco noted a pattern of social organisation and behaviour, where members of the “tribe” could be recognised by their “steps” and by their dress code (Ringdal 1991:67 in Lewis and Ross 1995:43). Lewis and Ross point out the way body language and attitude can distinguish between gay groups of dancers in a mixed Disco (ibid.).¹⁴⁴

Homosexuality in dance has been investigated mostly in the art/ballet context. But, as Hanna rightfully indicates, “no book explicitly examines sexuality, ‘the battle of the sexes’, and the cultural construction of gender options as they are played out in the production of visual imagery of dance” (1988:xv). This lack of academic discussion is even more adamant when it comes to the cultural construction of queer gender options and the ‘changing content and context of the feminist and gay liberation movements as they manifest themselves in dance, pushing aside the gatekeepers of social mobility and acceptability.’ (ibid.). When it comes to the gay popular dance culture, much has been written about the phenomenon and its social and musical aspects, mostly in Eurocentric cultures, but not about the body language and how it is reflected and perceived in gay parties.

Looking more specifically at the gay *latino* dancing experience, Rey writes in an essay about *latina* lesbians:

The club provides an emancipating cultural place for Latina lesbians [and gays], whose Hispanic [Latin] identities are aurally transmitted through rhythm and historically embodied in the act of dancing. Here, they can claim their space in the social realm, decolonizing the body with libidinal drives, and shifting the power dynamics, however transient, to the dancefloor (2006:125,126).

¹⁴⁴ I think these visual/physical observations are relevant and important, as are those I make in this sub-section, however they should be treated with caution, as they might lead to superficial stigmas and misinterpretations, and are also subject to individual behaviour and even on a group-basis subject to changes according to “trends”, sub-groupings, et cetera. Of course not *all* gays “camp it up” or have a “particular way of dancing”, but a “group” ethnography requires generalisation and an overall view at times.

The “gay Cuban dancing body” is an important bearer of identity (real, appropriated, and “reflected/mirrored” by the foreign gaze), and, as politically incorrect as it may sound, a “commodity” which Cuban gays offer to interested tourists.

In an essay titled: "How to get from space to place in a fairly short stretch of time: phenomenological prolegomena," Casey writes:

[J]ust as the body is basic to enculturation, so the body is itself always already enculturated. No more than space is prior to place is the body prior to culture. Rather than being a passive recipient or mere vehicle of cultural enactments, the body is itself enactive of cultural practices by virtue of its considerable powers of incorporation, habituation, and expression... Far from being dumb or diffuse, the lived body is as intelligent about the cultural specificities of a place as it is aesthesiologically sensitive to the perceptual particularities of that same place. Such a body is at once encultured and emplaced *and* enculturating and emplacing - while being massively sentient all the while.(1996:34).

The gay Cuban dancing body is indeed encultured and emplaced and bears historic complexes when it comes to foreigner-local relationships. Hodge writes about what he calls the “the colonization of the Cuban body” in an article dedicated to male sex work in Havana (2001). The dance floor has always been an arena for colonising (mentally and physically) the Cuban body as a sex-object. In the 1950s this “colonisation” was done in a blatant way in Havana hotels, bars, and casinos. In the 1990s, attitudes embedded in this colonisation has returned, albeit in what is supposedly a more subtle and “politically correct” way. Still, now as before, many tourists view the Cuban dancing body as a sexual object, taking a point of view that in many cases differs from that of the objectivised individuals themselves.

In my observations of more than thirty gay *fiestas* in which tourists were present (described in the previous chapter), I noticed differences between the way Cubans view the dancing body, and the way the foreigner onlookers do. Unlike the tourist gaze, the Cuban gaze appreciates the dance and the dancer, but does not necessarily relate these to sexual appeal or provocation. Sexual gestures between dancers can be “for laughs” or part of the routine, and are not necessarily intended as a form of sexual approach or lure, which is the way many tourists view it. On several occasions I have witnessed Cubans who watch the dancers with admiration, and may even ask them for a dance, but when it comes to “pick-up,” they tend to approach an available bystander, preferably a tourist.

In a mini survey I carried out in 2001, among tourists and locals I met at gay *fiestas*.

I asked twenty-two visitors (most of whom just stood and watched the locals dance) and thirty-two Cubans (who were all at one point dancing) to comment on the connection between the act of dancing and sexual attraction. Eighteen (81%) out of the twenty-two tourists questioned told me that they found that watching Cuban guys dance was sexually arousing. Only five out of thirty-two (16%) Cubans answered the same. Furthermore, sixteen (73%) out of the twenty-two tourists said they believed that the couples who appeared to be dancing “sexy dances” (*reggaetón*, *timba*, *salsa*) and making “sexual” gestures towards each other while dancing, such as *perreo* (“back-to-front” bottom grinding), pelvic thrusts, locking legs, et cetera, were effectively sexually attracted to each other. When asking the thirty-two dancers thus observed whether this was true, only seven (22%) said they were physically attracted to their dancing partner and would gladly go to bed with him (mini survey 2001).

These different readings demonstrate the local understanding and foreign misunderstanding of physical gestures on the dancefloor in Cuban society and in the gay *ambiente* in particular. This common misperception is typified by the following contrasting account of the same scene. In a *fiesta* I attended in 2001, Fabrizio, a thirty-two-year-old tourist from Italy said to me “When I see this guy [pointing at a Cuban dancer] rubbing his ass on the crotch of the other guy like this, it is obvious to me he would like to get fucked by him or at least tease him” (PersCom 2001); whereas the dancer in question (Raúl, 25, student at the university of Havana) commented:

No way. He is not even my type. If we want sex we just do it, we don’t need to tease and hint in the dance like you [foreigners]. If anything, the very sexual way we dance means: “We are free here. Free to be ourselves, to be a little outrageous, to be sexy. Unlike in the street or where I work. So it is more about freedom of expression and identity than about “come and fuck me” (PersCom 2001).

I have encountered many such misinterpretations of the gay Cuban dancing body’s movements on the dancefloor, showing how dance gestures and behaviour in the *fiestas* are coded and decoded by local Cuban gays, and the way foreigners interpret what they see. Notwithstanding, the dancing experience, the interaction between dancers, and the dance music played, are all integral parts of the gay identity space that is created in the *fiestas*, and which allows different levels and ways of interaction and identification. The dancing style of gay Cuban men in the *fiestas*, even

if its outward appearance is sexually provocative and teasing to some, is in many cases, as Raúl says, “more about freedom of expression and identity” than about “come and fuck me.”

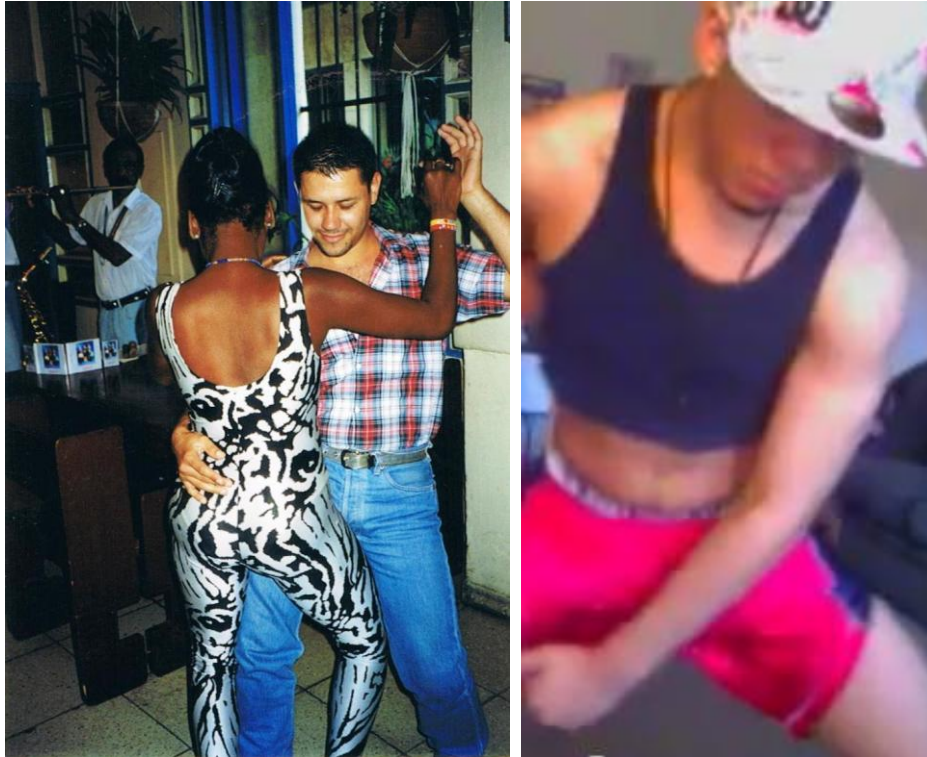


Photo 7.1 (left) Two informants dancing: My main and first informant Adrián (24) dancing *casino*-style salsa with my *jinetera* informant Ana (22) [photo” Moshe Morad, 1997]

Photo 7.2 (right) Gay boy dancing *reggaetón*, an image from one of many recently (post 2005) uploaded YouTube clips offering homoerotic solo reggaeton dances by Cuban gay young men (see also video-clips in Appendix II/4,5,6). [Source: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q8Nut6dxXCo&feature=results_main&playnext=1&list=PLBB7AC678F3A82621 (accessed 1.7.2012)]

“Gay musicality:” A queer reading of musical elements of the featured genres.

Reggaetón’s hybridity and duality

Unlike American and European dance music since the early 1980s, which was electronic/computer-based, and built on recycled rhythm loops, riffs, and sampling, in

Cuba *música bailable* is traditionally a live acoustic music domain, based on live rhythm and brass sections, culminating in the hyper-virtuoso “wall of sound” *timba* in the 1990s. Cuban *reggaetón* (a.k.a. *Cubatón*) is the first popular dance music genre produced in Cuba which is computerised and based on rhythm loops and sampling. It challenges traditional Cuban perceptions of live musicianship and musical aesthetics. It also openly challenges the government-owned music establishments such as *Empresa de Grabaciones y Ediciones Musicales* (EGREM), along with the recording studios, given that anyone can produce a *reggaetón* track at home with simple equipment, and distribute it in street stalls, without the need for either governmental or official backing.

The computerised sound and nature of *reggaetón* has various practical, aesthetic, and social/ psychological significance, some of which make it particularly attractive to a gay audience. It is “an inherently hybrid music” (Marshall 2010) which “purists of all sorts decry” (ibid.). The rhythm is pulsating and syncopated combining Eurocentric “Techno” and Latino “sensibilities,” adding another dimension to its inherent hybridity. Its musical characteristics include “over the top” exaggeration and repetition, “trashy” street discourse expressions and “recycled rhythms and riffs” (Marshall 2010), thus resonating with aesthetical values of Camp (Sontag 1964), as seen in drag shows which thrive on exaggeration, “trashiness,” and “recycling” (see Chapter 8).¹⁴⁵

Still, musically, it seems that Cubans were unable to forgo the essential Cuban musical elements such as the *clave* for long. Towards the end of my fieldwork, in 2005-2006, a new, more sophisticated form of Cuban *reggaetón* evolved, combining more complex elements from salsa and *timba*, labelled *salsatón* or *timbatón*. Frank Palacios Naranjo, keyboard player with top Cuban *reggaetón* band “Los 4” (The Four), explains:

In recent years we [Cuban musicians] started adding more Cuban musical elements to *reggaetón* with live or [sampled] loops of brass, bass, even piano and *montuno* parts, making it a combination of salsa or *timba* with *reggaetón*. People call it *salsatón* or *timbatón*. The difference is that unlike most *reggaetón* artists in other countries, Cuban musicians are not just “computer musicians” but are very good players with a good musical training. I, for example, play flute, saxophone and keyboards. I have classical training as well as jazz and electronic. The Cuban rhythms are in our blood, and it was natural that they would start infiltrating into *reggaetón* (Interview, Havana 2010).¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Video examples of popular *reggaetón* tracks demonstrating recycled rhythm loops and riffs, sampling, repetitiveness, exaggeration and “trashy” lyrics, in Appendix II/7,9.

¹⁴⁶ This also happened with other “international” popular dance music genres which entered the Cuban music scene,

Here are some examples of *reggaetón* tracks that were very popular in the gay *fiestas* I attended during the last years of my fieldwork (2005.2007), demonstrating the genre’s hybridity combining "square" Eurocentric and Latino/*clave* rhythmic elements:

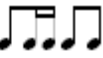

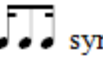
In “Atrévete, te, te” mentioned above¹⁴⁷, the rhythmic pattern switches from “square rhythm”  to syncopation , which together with the fast-paced sixteenth notes melody line, occasionally broken and with an occasional  syncopation in it as well, creates a hybrid, neurotic, and confused polyrhythmic texture :

Fig. 7.1¹⁴⁸

Melody line



Rhythm



The same syncopated/square duality/hybridity appears in the rhythmic pattern of “A mi mama me lo contó” (Mammy Told Me) by Cuban band Gente de Zona, a very popular track in 2005 gay *fiestas*:

Fig.7.2



from funk in the 1970s and 1980s, to hip-hop. Please choose which one you want to use and then do “search and replace” to standardize the words] and *reggaetón* in the 1990s, the “infiltration” starts with copies of the foreign genres, but they soon become “infected” with traditional Cuban music elements, such as *clave*, percussion, *montuno*, etc., and develop into a local style fusing Cuban elements with the original genre – such as the funk of Irakere in the 1980s, and Hip-hop Cubano in the 1990s, and *reggaetón a lo Cubano* in the 2000s.

¹⁴⁷ Video: Appendix II/7

¹⁴⁸ All transcriptions in this thesis were made by me, unless indicated otherwise

In “Fresa y chocolate” (the title hinting at the famous Cuban gay movie) by Los Salvajes, the rhythm pattern again is typical to *reggaetón*: a repetition of a two syncopated beats and two 'square' beats pattern), whereas the melody/rap is square sixteenth-notes-based hip-hop style, occasionally “broken”.

Fig. 7.3

Rhythm:



Melody:



The 2007 track “Tierra caliente” (“Hot Country”) by Gente de Zona and Eddy K features a more complex hybrid rhythmicity with a more Cuban flavor thanks to a highly syncopated cycling piano part based on a *montuno* form,

Fig. 7.4



A “square” melodic/rap line:



... and the typical hybrid *reggaetón* rhythmic pattern, as in the previous example:



Finally, Baby Llores' song "*A una loca como tu*" (To a Crazy Woman Like You), which with "*loca*" being a popular gay discourse term used for a wild, over the top, feminine "queen," has been appropriated in gay *fiestas* and has become a very popular gay hit.

The rhythm pattern of the song combines a 'square' drumset part of 4 sixteenth notes

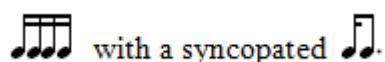


Fig. 7.5



The melody/rap line also combines square and broken/syncopated parts.



Reading the music from a gay identity perspective, the "Cubanisation" of *reggaetón*

resulting in these "mixed"/hybrid square/syncopated rhythmic patterns as demonstrated above, takes us again to the on-going duality of "international" and "local" in Cuban gay psychology. I argue that this "split personality"/duality of *Cubatón* contributes to its "gay-appeal". This "split personality" has other aspects as well. Whereas in Puerto Rico *reggaetón* is associated with the hip-hop scene (and known for its heterosexist and sometimes even homophobic tone, making it unpopular among gays), in Cuba hip-hop and *reggaetón* are perceived as two quite distinct genres (Fairley 2006:283) that cater to different audiences; *reggaetón* is recognised as more gay friendly, and indeed more appealing to the gay audience.

Tempo and rhythm

A musical characteristic of house that resonates particularly well with the Afro-Cuban musical roots of gay Cubans is the central place of rhythm in it and the fast-pace pulsating rhythm, bringing an Afro-Cuban sensibility into the experience, which may be understood in the Eurocentric world in an essentialist way as "African". As Thomas writes:

There are two common traits that hold for all house: the music is always a brisk 120 BPM or faster; and percussion is everything. Drums and percussion are brought to the fore, and instrumental elements are electronically reproduced. In Western music, rhythm is secondary in emphasis and complexity to harmony and melody. In house music, as in African music, this sensibility is reversed (1995:442).

The average bpm played in gay clubs is significantly higher than in straight ones.¹⁴⁹ Fiona Buckland writes about the post-disco Hi NRG gay-clubs genre: "Record producers increased the speed of dance cuts and coupled it with strong vocals and melodies to produce a purposeful sense of joy and excitement..." (2002:68). In the early 1980s, house music with its very long pieces and "a brisk 120 bpm or faster" (Thomas 1995:442), evolved and from the 1990s onwards generally ranges between 120 and 135 bpm. In the UK and continental Europe in the early 1980s, a Hi NRG took over gay clubs, characterised by a very fast tempo (120–150 bpm). *Reggaetón* ranges between 100

¹⁴⁹ This is based on my own experience as DJ in both gay and straight clubs.

and 120 bpm and “non gay” hip-hop between 90–100 bpm.¹⁵⁰ Specifically to the *fiestas* in Havana, in 2006-2007 I have measured during 30 minutes the average speed in three gay fiestas and in three straight fiestas. I performed the measuring in all fiestas at the same hour (between midnight and 1 p.m.) to avoid the typical shift in speed between the early hours and very late hours. The average at the straight *fiestas* was 110 bpm, and at the gay *fiestas* was 125 bpm.

When looking at the rhythmic aspect, not only is the high bpm typical in these genres, but also the intensity of the rhythm section in the general sound, which is in fact common to all genres features in this chapter (in salsa and *timba* live drumming/percussion/bass, in *reggaetón* and house– electronic rhythm loops). Dyer notes that “[r]hythm, in Western music is traditionally felt as being more physical than other musical elements such as melody, harmony, and instrumentation. This is why Western music is traditionally so dull rhythmically... It is to other cultures that we had to turn to – above all Afro-American culture – to learn about rhythm” (Dyer 1979:411). The connection of disco and disco-derived house to African-American music is clear and so is the connection of salsa, *timba* and even *reggaetón* to Afro-Cuban music. Dyer uses this connection to explain the “physicality” of disco and House, in comparison to the “white” music of the same period and in the context of the “white” environment it evolved in, and thus - its sensualised connotation. He writes:

Typically, black music was thought of by the white culture as being more primitive and more “authentically” erotic. Infusions of black music were always seen as (and often condemned as) sexual and physical. The use of insistent black rhythms in Disco music, recognizable by the closeness of the style to soul and reinforced by such characteristic features of black music as the repeated chanted phrase and the use of various African percussions instruments, means that it inescapably signifies (in this white context) physicality (ibid.).

Repetitiveness and cyclicity

Another rhythmical aspect, repetitiveness, or even “exaggerated” repetitiveness of a fast-pace rhythmic pattern, can be found in all featured dance genres, and in African-originated music. As will be described in Chapter 9, repetitiveness is typical to Afro-Cuban percussion music, especially the music in *santería* possession ceremonies where

¹⁵⁰ House, Hi NRG and *reggaetón* bpm range based on my own measuring. Hip-hop bpm source: <http://www.mstrismusic.com/2008/06/correct-bpm-for-hiphop/> (accessed 22.8.2010).

cyclical repetitiveness is needed to achieve a state of trance. The drumming in *santería* ceremonies produced by the three sacred double-headed *batá* drums (see Chapter 9) and the polyrhythmic interlocking technique used by the ensemble creates a fast-pace repeating pattern of 1/16 beats, as demonstrated by Schweitzer below.

Fig. 7.6



Excerpt of a toque for the oricha Osain (from top to bottom: okónkolo, iyá, itótele. The high pitch in each part is played on the chachá drumhead (the smaller one) and the low pitch on the enu drumhead (the larger one). (Source: Schweitzer 2003:116)

Fig. 7.7



Reduction of the *chachá* (higher pitch) drumheads to a single stave, creating a 1/16 beats repeating pattern (Schweitzer 2003:116)

A 1/6 beats repeating pattern is also typical of the *mambo* section in the *montuno* parts in salsa and in *timba*, a section of “improvisations which occur over a short (usually two-or-four measure) repeated phrase that feature relatively simple harmonies” (Orovio 2004:141). The *montuno* usually comes towards the end of a piece and can be extended according to the musicians’ decision. In *timba* it is sometimes extended so much that it becomes the central part of the piece (Perna 2005:111).

Repetitiveness of a rhythmic pattern is also characteristic of *reggaetón* as seen in Figs. 6.5-6.8. As for house, already at the end of the disco era and the switch into techno and house repetitive electronic loops became part of the musical language.¹⁵¹ One of the

¹⁵¹ which later also affected *reggaetón*, techno being one of its sources.

been associated with masculinity, while cyclic movement, repetitive gestures, and unrelenting undulations have been associated with the feminine” (McClary 1991 in Jarman-Ivens 2007:208). According to Jarman-Ivens, these associations “persist in contemporary understandings of gender and musical representation” (2007:208)

This musical trait of cyclicity leading to a “problematic closure’ or “non closure” conceived in the West as “feminine,” is also typical of gay music. Dyer identifies it in gay disco music. He claims that Western popular songs are typically “rounded off, closed, self-contained,” with a characteristic AABA structure, when the song ends in the tonic note, i.e. giving a feeling of anchoring and settling down, and that during the tunes’ evolutions. Even when they depart from their melodic and harmonic beginnings in the B part, “the tune is not allowed to invade the whole of one’s body” (1979: 410). The passion is restrained and they always return to the starting A part, giving a sense of security, containment and control. A typical disco tune, however, is, “often little more than an endlessly repeated phrase that derives beyond itself [‘I Feel Love’ for example]” (ibid.), and is therefore cyclical and *not* closed-off. Cyclicity and non-closure are also typical traits of Afro-Cuban religious and folkloric music, thus creating a double attraction and identification among Cuban gays.

The “limping effect”

When looking hip-hop Jarman-Ivens describes rhythmic “limping” effect caused by subtle shifts of rhythmic emphasis in rap songs. This “limping” effect, she claims leads to “doubts about the ‘perfect masculinity’ of those articulating the message” (2007:210). Jarman-Ivens adds this rhythmic effect to two other “masculinity destabilising” musical traits she finds in hip-hop: the “relentlessly cyclic motifs combine[d] with an avoidance of the traditionally ‘strong’ (read: masculine, in the musical semiotic system) perfect cadence, which typically signifies closure, to generate a sequence that is repeatable and infinitum” (ibid.:209); and the “unusual” harmonic behaviour (refusing to go according to the traditional western notions of musical tension and release via the tonic-dominant relationship) which can, according to McClary, be seen to work against the traditional musical representation of masculinity, and even “be taken as a threat to hegemonic masculinities” (ibid.).

This “limping” effect, in addition to the typical cyclicity and repetitiveness, can also be found in *reggaetón*, for example, in this line of “Atrévete, te, te”:

Fig. 7.9 (also appears in Fig. 7.1)



This resonates with the “doubts about the ‘perfect masculinity’” of this super-masculine/macho genre, and its queer appropriation described in the previous chapter.

Multiple climaxes

When I asked Yuri, a DJ at gay *fiestas*, why house was so popular in the *fiestas*, he commented:

The electronic repetitive sound of house is something only gays like here [in Cuba].. If you ask straights, they prefer hip-hop, live sound, and lots of vocals – but gays, they like this *oompa-oompa* endless electronic beat, and then the dramatic vocals or violins growing which make them go crazy over and over again every time the music reaches a climax... I cannot explain why, but maybe it has to do with gays being more artistic, more dramatic, maybe even more sexy [smiles]...we like more than one climax [loughs]” (PersCom 2001).

Yuri refers to another typical feature of house: diva-esque vocals and dramatic symphonic “sweeps” (which can also be found in a shorter, more hectic and nervous form in *reggaetón*), leading to multiple climaxes.

In an essay in *Audible Traces*, a collection of works dedicated to gender and sexual identity and music, Mitchell Morris (1999:213-230) examines the Weather Girls’ song “It’s Raining Men,” written by Paul Jabara and Paul Shaffer in 1979, which became a “gay anthem” in the 1980s. Coincidentally, it was the first track that I heard in my first *fiesta de diez pesos* (1995) and was present in the playlists of many of the *fiestas* that followed.¹⁵³ Morris analyses the song and identifies in it an unusual structure dominated by multiple climaxes and an “extension,” which creates overlapping parts: “strikingly, there are three (or five, depending on individual reaction) large climaxes of close to equal strength occurring in the song” (Morris 1999:222). He further explains the multi-climax

¹⁵³ Audio: App. III/10

phenomenon: “For the exact number of climaxes does not matter as much as their additive effect: not one goal, but a series of goals, best heard as potentially limitless” (ibid.: 223). Morris finds an analogy between this structure to the promiscuous “gay lifestyle” feel of the early 1980s pre-AIDS period, and to what he calls in the title of his essay “the erotics of instability.” The repeating multiple climaxes which Morris associates with promiscuity, erotic freedom (representing both multiple orgasms and multiple sexual partners), and erotic instability can also be associated with the glorification of exaggeration and overdoing in Camp.

Multiple climaxes are in fact typical of all the genres featured in this section, and not only of house: The whole *montuno* part in salsa¹⁵⁴--which is particularly extended in *timba*--can be seen as a long, recurring, multiple-climax section. DJ Yuri also gives the phenomenon a (homo)sexual reading: “[In *timba*] the *montuno* part of the song is sometimes like a long endless multiple orgasm, the pick of the track, when everyone goes mad, the women or *locas* doing the *despelote*, and when it ends you are left out of breath” (PersCom 2001). *Reggeatón* tracks, in spite of being shorter significantly shorter than *timba* and house pieces, also feature multiple exaggerated climaxes.

Conclusion

This chapter was dedicated to the analysis of the *fiestas de diez pesos* phenomenon, the behaviour, psychology and interaction of the party-goers, and the analysis of its queer musical element. In order to put the *fiestas de diez pesos* experience in a global context and deconstruct it, I referred to literature about dance parties’ culture in general and gay party subcultures in particular.

Lewis and Ross talk about the “imagined power” as obtained in these parties via a ‘transformed reality’” (1995:48), and both concepts are just as relevant to the Havana *fiestas* scene. Many of Lewis and Ross’s informants “suggested that these transformed realities often created and maintained boundaries which insulated them from the external threats...in their everyday reality” (ibid.). I showed how the *fiestas* offered a sense of

¹⁵⁴ See Fig. 7.8

security, protection and a social framework to gays in Special Period Havana, and, furthermore, how the *fiestas* scene contributed to the evolution of individual and group gay identity in Havana. To start with, for many Cuban gays it is, as described in this chapter, “a gateway or initiation into the gay subculture” (Lewis and Ross 1995:196), the first encounter of new “initiates” if not into the gay experience, then definitely into the gay *social* expression experience.

As for escapism, Dyer describes disco’s “passion and intensity [which] embody or create an experience that negates the dreariness of the mundane and everyday” (1995[1979]:413). The gay *fiestas* provide an escape from the dreary and miserable everyday in Special Period Havana, and, via the music, create a matrix, a virtual world of passion, romance and glamour. Dyer talks about a “gap between what is and what could or should be” (1995[1979]:414), which the gay dance parties intensify and at the same time bridge

Based on previous works on electronic dance music cultures, with the addition of the special circumstances and cultural background of Cuba, I compared the group behaviour in the *fiestas* with ritual behavior and the scene’s social function, psychology and structure to religion. The scene also provides an “alternative family” to its patrons, many of whom are disconnected from a traditional family, due to their migrant (out-of-town) status and/or their sexuality.

Finally, both genres and the *fiesta* scene in general as described above reflect the “Cuban paradox”/dichotomy of being very local, with a strong embrace of *cubanidad* in the lyrics, music, and imaging - for example, the use of traditional Cuban music genres and forms such as *clave*-base parts and *montuno* sections in *timba* and in the most recent *reggaetón* sub-genres *salsatón* and *timbatón*, the use of *santería* discourse in the lyrics (Perna 2005:188), and even the use of “revolutionary” imagery and flags in Cuban *reggaetón* album covers and in events.¹⁵⁵ At the same time, they reflect global ideas and inspirations and “Cuban’s emergent imagining of the global: the newly acquired expectations, among previously disenfranchised groups, of life beyond revolutionary socialism” (Hernandez-Reguant 2004:2).

¹⁵⁵ See photo 5.2

Summarising these two chapters and putting them in the context of the title of this thesis and its three major themes, the *fiestas*, the music played in them, and the way it was appropriated, has provided an emotional *space* for identity with a gay universe, a sense of belonging, and resistance to the *machismo*, heterosexism, and homophobia of Cuban society. It also provided a physical space for *interaction* with other gays, locals and tourists, and for expressing freely sexual attraction and sexual availability towards other males. As for *escapism*, the *fiestas* themselves were escapist solutions, offering an “escape” for the night from the street, the lack of private space due to the housing shortage and the otherwise hostile streets with their ever-present vigilant eyes of the police. At the same time, the music played at the *fiestas* and the emotional *space* created in them celebrated escapism on a larger scale: escaping from the real world of economic hardship and oppression, into an illusory world of music, fun and abandonment and perhaps even a ticket out of Cuba, courtesy of one of the tourists watching the dancing crowd.

Unlike the *fiestas* where the dancefloor is the main arena and everyone is both “performer” and “audience,” in the scenes described in the following chapter, there is a proper “stage area” and a clear distinction between stage performers (involving music, dance and acting) and audience. The “gay space”, although inspired by the stage performance and the music, is created among the audience.

Chapter 8

Performance, performativity, and audience, Part I - “El chow”: Drag shows and the Ballet Nacional

Introduction

The following two chapters are dedicated to three very different musical scenes involving performance, audience and gender performativity. All of these are scenes that became important meeting and socialising spaces for gays in Special Period Havana. These are drag shows, ballet performances, and finally *santería* religious ceremonies where the “performance” is of music and dance with the purpose of pleasing the deities and communicating with them, and invoking spirit possession. These three different scenes are characterised by an audience that not only passively spectates, but actively forms a gay space. Schechner differentiates between accidental audience (a non-involved audience arriving to see a performance for the aesthetic experience), and integral audience, “where people come because they have to, or because the event is of special significance to them” (1988 [2003]:220). I argue that the gay audience in these three events is “integral” and will demonstrate it as such in this chapter and the one that follows.

In any other context, the grouping of drag shows, ballet performances, and *santería* rituals may seem far-fetched and even unacceptable. However, in this context there are many similarities, from the exaggerated performance infused with queer appropriations and codes, to the creation of a gay space among the integral audience.

In drag shows and *santería* spirit possession, the “exaggerated performance” involves (always, in the case of drag show; and sometimes, in the case of *santería*, cross-gender transformation, or, using Butler’s terminology “gender performativity” by choice or by possession (1999[1990])). If gender, as per Butler, is the effect of reiterated performance, based on “the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain

discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions” (ibid.:179), then in drag shows and *santería orisha* possession, this performativity is challenged by adding another layer of performance which destabilises the “originally performed” gender yet emphasises it and its social significance. Taking his cue from Butler, Moe Meyer writes, “[b]ecause gender identity is instituted by repetitive acts, then queer performance is not expressive of the social identity but is, rather, the reverse – the identity is self-reflexively constituted by the performances themselves”(1994:4). In the cases of these three spheres these two chapters will show how indeed the actual performances constitute the social identity and foster the identity spaces.

Exaggerated performance in general was examined during the discussions of *fiestas* and in bolero. This part of the thesis is dedicated to performance fields, with a supposedly clear division between performers and audience. Performance here is not limited to not only what unfolds on-stage, but also to what takes place in and among the audience. In fact, the main focus of this investigation is the audience rather than the stage, and the way such performances create a virtual scene off-stage. Methodological processes employed here included observing and analysing audience behaviour and its response to the “staged” performances,¹⁵⁶ and also the interaction between people in the audience.

Another factor that is common to the three very different scenes is that they primarily belong to conceptual spaces. That is, they are bound to social concepts about the homosexuality of those practicing and enjoying those three spheres--ballet, drag shows, and *santería*. Still, the queer spaces in these three spheres is appropriated by gays within larger public spaces, and is created, bound and maintained by the relation between performance, gender performativity, and the integral audience. Music is an essential ingredient of these three “performance spaces,” but is not the main theme of each. Those are dance (ballet), comedy/impersonation (drag), and religion (*santería*).

This part will be divided to two chapters – the first one looking at two purely performative spheres, where there is a clear separation between the performers (on stage) and the audience, and where people come to enjoy the performance as an act of entertainment, a “*chow*” as Cuban call it (a mispronunciation of “show”)--ballet and drag

¹⁵⁶ *Santería* is of course different in this sense, as the spirit possessions are supposedly not “staged” but still, there is a strong element of performance, audience and other common aspects with the other two scenes.

shows. The next chapter will be dedicated to the ritual performance aspect within *santería* religion, and the way the worship and cosmology of the religion resonate with homosexuality and help creating a gay space.

Travesti chow (drag shows)

"Actors usually say 'the stage is my life.' I say, 'life is my stage.'" (Mariela, transvestite and drag queen, PersCom 2005)

In the early days of the Revolution, drag shows were banned in Cuba. The most popular transvestite and drag queen at the time, known as "La china musmet," was prohibited from appearing dressed as a woman. However, this prohibition did not last long and, unlike homosexuals, transvestites have been accepted in society and by the authorities since the 1970s (Lumsden 1996:197). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, some Havana cabarets such as L'Arlequín and the Café de Paris started enlisting drag queens in their shows.

According to Havana-based IPS press agency reporter Dalia Acosta, "transvestites and transsexuals have gained a higher social profile in Cuba, or at least in the capital, Havana, since the early 1990s", and drag shows became more and more popular (Acosta 2004). It should be stressed though that drag shows are by no means only performed by transvestites and transsexuals, and in fact, out of twenty-two drag queens that I interviewed on different occasions, only twelve admitted to be transvestites "in real life", and two were transsexuals.

During my research period there were several venues featuring regular drag shows, in addition to occasional drag *fiestas*. The most popular drag venue has been Bar de Las Estrellas, featuring Havana's top *transformistas*. I attended various kinds of drag shows, from those at Bar de Las Estrellas to improvised home drag shows, providing "cheap entertainment" but also offering a world of glamour, escapism, and a much needed emotional outlet..

I met, saw performances of, and interviewed 25 Cuban drag queens. Here are their stage names: Amanda, Imperio, Diana, Samantha de Monaco, Kiriam, Orianna, Cacha, Tina, Naomi, Maridalia, Rebeca, Perla Negra, Ana Nelson, Fifi, Gloria, Mercedes, Gala,

America, Sintia, Naila Lee, Chopi, Estrellita, Chantal, Mariela, and Brunette (real name Yasmani, who became my main drag-scene informant).

Following are descriptions of two different events I attended that are of Special Period Havana's drag-scene. One, an "official" Bar de Las Estrellas' drag *soirée*, and the other, a home drag *fiesta* in one of Havana's poorest neighbourhoods.

Description: Bar de Las Estrellas

Bar de Las Estrellas (Bar of the Stars) is a drag show venue run by flamboyant entrepreneur Rojelio Conde in a *paladar* in the Lawton neighborhood in Havana,¹⁵⁷ which has been featuring regular drag-parties since the beginning of the 1990s. Despite being technically illegal (the place is licensed as a maximum 12-seats restaurant, and not a busy drag show bar), for nearly twenty years the place kept running intermittently with only temporary closures. Most of the time, it was tolerated by the authorities, with many rumours circulating about how Conde was managing to keep the place open and mollify the police.

A typical show at Bar de Las Estrellas features six drag queens, each one performing two sets. The songs "performed" (mimed to) vary from sultry boleros and melodramatic songs from soap-operas to North American pop ballads, with the exception of one or two up-tempo salsa or *reguetón* songs (usually as part of a comedy/parody number). Cubans who can afford to pay the entry fee (or are invited by foreigners), along with a few *extranjeros*, sit at tables drinking rum and watching the drag queens perform. From time to time, someone from the audience goes up on stage and sticks a *moneda nacional* or CUC note in the drag queen's cleavage.¹⁵⁸

The first evening that I visited Bar de Las Estrellas in 2000 was hosted by Havana's most celebrated veteran drag queen Samantha de Monaco. The highlight of the Cuban underground documentary film "Mariposas en el andamio" (Butterflies on the Scaffold, 1995), about a group of drag queens performing in a worker's union party in a suburb of Havana, is an emotional scene where the melodramatic song "Sólo se vive una vez" (You Only Live Once), commonly known as "Vivir vivir." This is the theme-song of a

¹⁵⁷ See map in Fig. 4.2

¹⁵⁸ See Photo 8.2

Peruvian soap opera named "Leonela" which was very popular in Cuba, is dedicated on-stage to young Samantha de Monaco, who had been diagnosed HIV-positive in 1995.¹⁵⁹ This song has since become an anthem in drag shows, dedicated to those who are HIV-positive, and was performed by Samantha de Monaco on the night I attended the show, to a standing ovation.

The evening at Bar de Las Estrellas ended with the audience dancing salsa and (post-2000) *reggaetón* to recorded music and lots of smooching and cuddling (which is not allowed between men in the streets). The drag queens mix with the audience, whether in or out of drag. This is how I met 25 years-old Yasmani ("Brunette"), one of my main informants, a Whitney Huston look-alike on stage, and a handsome young student off-stage.¹⁶⁰

Description: home drag fiesta

Drag is primarily a working-class phenomenon, "a phenomenon of the disenfranchised" (Kirsch 2000:98). This is strongly felt in the Latin American drag world, and specifically in Cuba. I have witnessed this tolerance of the "lower classes" toward cross-dressing and female impersonation on many occasions.¹⁶¹ In 2003, I was invited by a group of friends to a small, dilapidated apartment in a very poor neighbourhood in old Havana. Three local gay boys had prepared a drag show for the local neighbours. They had managed to get hold of a piece of sequined material from which they made three dresses, and with the help of make-up, high-heel shoes and other accessories they had borrowed from their female friends, they transformed themselves into three glamorous divas. In their small living room some neighbours gathered to watch the show. A cassette player was obtained from a neighbour and cassettes of old bolero divas Olga Guillot, Elena Burke, La Lupe and others, as well as American drag-icons Barbara Streisand and Liza Minnelli, had been borrowed from another neighbour. The music and the drag transformed the dreary room into a hall of glamour and pure

¹⁵⁹ See this scene in an excerpt from the movie in Appendix II/11

¹⁶⁰ Photo: 8.3

¹⁶¹ See video: Appendix II/10

escapism. Just as the *chow* began, a power-cut interrupted the performance, and the disappointed divas joined the audience in neighbourhood gossip with their deep voices, smoking the cheap, local “Popular” cigarettes. When the power came back, the tape was turned on again and the show continued. With particular care and seriousness, the three young men started miming to the songs and acting the parts, making seduction gestures towards the (gay and straight) men, who seemed mesmerised. An old woman was even wiping tears away when the drag queen Gloria started miming to a heartbreaking bolero of betrayed love, accompanied by dramatic gestures. Gloria, Fifi and Mercedes not only created a space for their own identification and self-realisation, but also a space of escapism and make-believe for their neighbours.¹⁶²

Another interesting scene, not a gay space, featuring drag shows, and demonstrating the social acceptance of drag shows as a legitimate (and cheap) form of entertainment, is workers’ unions and CDR parties. This was demonstrated in the documentary film “Mariposas en el andamio” mentioned above.¹⁶³ Ironically, since their establishment in 1960 and until the late 1980s, these CDRs, were tasked with keeping an eye on the people in the neighbourhood and informing the authorities about any anti-revolutionary behaviour. They were responsible for the persecution of many homosexual men, as described by Reinaldo Arenas in his autobiography *Antes que anochezca* (Before Night Falls, 1993[1992]). During the 1990s, not only their surveillance role diminished, but in some cases they were headed by openly gay people (Lumsden 1996:154).

Drag politics and philosophy

According to Butler (1991), identities and categories only exist in the ideal and not in real life. All attempts to reconcile the ideal with the real result in performance, therefore all gender and sexual identity (including men, women, and transgenders) is performed. Butler looks at drag as a source of understanding *all* gender performativity: “in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency” (Butler 1991:137). Butler argues that “[d]rag is not an imitation

¹⁶² See photos: 8.4, 8.6

¹⁶³ See photo 8.8

or a copy of some prior and true gender,” but rather “enacts the very structure of impersonation by which *any gender* is assumed” (ibid.:312). That is, “[d]rag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation” (ibid.:313). Furthermore, performances, repetitions and mimes are all, according to Butler, “gender practices” and consist part of “normal” gender performativity, making drag a reflection of that performativity (ibid.:314).

Queer theorists see, in the mere impersonation of women in drag shows, an act which requires exaggeration, outrageous behavior and subversion: “The male/female binarism is predicated upon the idea that while the gender dichotomy itself is normative and authentic, masculinity (and, in particular, white hetero masculinity) is the original and femininity is the derivative other”, and therefore drag queens need to employ “outrageous artificiality” in order to bring out the performativity of femininity (Butler 1991:314).

In “old-school” homosexuality, and that which existed in Cuba prior to the 1990s, gender, performativity and identity were strongly related: “passive” homosexual men acted as women, and “active” homosexual men acted as men. Post-1990 gays in Havana no longer feel the need to “perform” one of these binary gender roles, and yet they still perform, this time a new “global gay” role based on identity and culture, rather than gender.

Day-to-day cross-dressing provides a solution for effeminate men in the old binary gender/sexuality world. By dressing up and imitating a woman, men obey the social order, the traditional binary of the sexist/*machoist* homophobic stigma--that one must be either a man or a woman, but not an in-between. This can explain the acceptance and popularity of transvestites and drag queens amongst working-class and rural heterosexual Cubans. On at least three occasions during my travels on the island, I encountered transvestites who were accepted and treated with respect in rural societies. Juan (25), a *guajiro* (peasant) from a village in the province near Santa Clara, told me: “A *loca* who goes all the time fully dressed as a woman is more tolerated here than a man who looks like some Havana gays--with a body of a wrestler and the soul of a woman. This I find quite sickening” (PersCom 1999). However, whilst cross-dressing may provide a feasible

solution for men who wish to look and act as women within the traditional binary frame, and for a society that wishes to accommodate them without destabilising the traditional man/woman binarism, when performed on-stage and accompanied by music, drag assumes a queer significance, and provides an outlet to queer interpretations, thus destabilising the binary norms. "Drag artists are all performing their own queerness and simultaneously exposing the artificiality of conventional gender roles". (Halberstam 1998:261). Female impersonation allows for acts of subversion. The body assumes its projection of gender via the performance of instilled cultural practices, and therefore affords scope for going against the expected by altering the performance (Kirsch 2000:86).

Schacht, a drag queen who researched the phenomenon, describes the drag experience in a Eurocentric context from a point of view of both a drag queen and a researcher:

From my ethnographic involvement in these various drag contexts, like many researchers in this area, I have also come to experientially appreciate that sexuality and gender are anything but innate, fixed, or concrete realities that individuals merely embody and are in fact fluid, continuously ongoing performances that we accomplish in concert with others. Nevertheless, while doing gender and sexuality is a form of imitation and performance wherein the individual actor enacts being either male or female, gay or straight, my analysis of various types of female drag throws into question expected outcomes of such presentations of self. That is, if a self-identified man convincingly presents himself as a woman, a culturally beautiful or a dishevelled one, yet still strongly identifies with being a man, then what results is a masculine embodiment of the feminine. The additional homosexual embodiment of the heterosexual--gay identified men presenting images of heterosexual conformity--that often is undertaken by those doing female drag is used to further reinforce the seemingly innateness of the image they are performing which often results in more compelling and convincing images of the feminine (Schacht 2002:174).

Kaminski rightfully notes that although queer theory gurus (Butler 1990, Warner 1992, Seidman 1993) pontificated that "binary sex, gender, and sexuality categories must be deconstructed in order to achieve equality, they have provided few empirical examples of how individuals might do that" (Kaminski 2003:123). According to Kaminski, "drag shows provide the concrete example of how participants can conceptualize sexuality as fluid, shifting and non-dichotomous," and they therefore constitute "free spaces" or "safe spaces" of cultural experience where "audience members discover alternative views of

gender and sexuality that disrupt the dominant system” (ibid.). By imitating and exaggerating traditional heterosexual roles, drag is a declaration of war on stigmas related to gender, sexuality and appearance. At the most complex, it is a double inversion that says, “appearance is an illusion.” Drag says “my ‘outside’ appearance is feminine, but my essence ‘inside’ [the body] is masculine.” At the same time it symbolises the opposite inversion; my appearance “outside” [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence “inside” [myself] is feminine (Newton 1979[1972]:103).

Drag's status and social role in Special Period Havana

Divas and more

One important role that drag queens play in Havana’s gay *ambiente* is that of divas. Musical “divas” are part of gay culture everywhere, embodying subversion on “conservative” norms, and the “normalisation” of queer “values,” a subject of identification, adoration and imitation.

In contemporary Cuba, unlike the Eurocentric music scene or pre-Revolution Cuba, there are no living musical or theatrical divas. “Diva-ism” contradicts the revolutionary ideology of equality and became a decadent and deviant concept according to revolutionary doctrines. “Musical diva-ism” contradicts the revolutionary cultural conceptualisation of music as “music of the people.” No wonder the real divas of Cuban music, such as Celia Cruz, Olga Guillot, La Lupe, Albita Rodriguez, Maggie Carles and Annia Linares, left Cuba and flourished in exile (see Chapter 10). Diva-ism in post-revolutionary Cuba was only embraced and celebrated privately and clandestinely by homosexuals. In Havana during the Special Period, with the lack of real living divas, drag queens performed this gay-culture function and became the *ambiente*’s embodiment of diva-ism, hence their popularity and privileged status in Havana’s mainstream gay scene.

In most of the drag shows I attended in Havana, the drag artistes usually impersonated larger-than-life divas. Still, there are differences in the nature of drag acts between the CDR event drag shows and drag performances I attended in the provinces, which were based on a more traditional “female impersonation.” The drag shows I attended in Havana involved more parody, exaggerating and ridiculing the female role,

often creating a destabilised or “crossover” identity on-stage (for example, by speaking in a deep masculine voice in between the female mime sections). This on-stage identity manipulation and outrage strategy is a strong catalyst to the gay identity *space* created among the audience, and brings it closer to the new global gay culture which the *ambiente* nurtures during the Special Period, a culture where drag is strongly associated with Camp (Newton 1979[1972]).

Camp sensibility

Camp is an aesthetic perception which celebrates the “love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (Sontag 1964), popular from the 1960, especially in gay culture. Camp looks at art (in this case, music) and performance through a very special lens defined by Sontag (ibid.) as a “gay sensibility,” “a badge of identity,” and “a private code” which contains irony, non-conformism and certain elements of the absurd. It is “a vision of the world in terms of style,” but a particular kind of style, emphasising and glorifying the “off,” the “things-being-what-they-are-not” (ibid.). It challenges binary evaluations of good and bad, and is therefore queer in nature. According to Corey and Doty, Camp is “Gay culture’s contribution to modernism” (1995;2), and it has the ability to “queer” straight culture by asserting that there is queerness at the core of mainstream culture (ibid.: 3). Bolero (Chapter10) is a perfect example for this, a “heterosexual” genre which , by its own exaggerated and ambiguous essence, brings out its “queerness”.

Esther Newton defines Camp as a system of humour in which “the drag queen is its natural exponent” (Newton 1979[1972]:xx). Earlier, in 1964, Sontag wrote: “All Camp objects, and persons, contain a large element of artifice. ... Camp is a vision of the world in terms of style--but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the “off”, of things-being-what-they-are-not.” This is precisely what drag is about. It complies with the notion of Camp as a celebration of artifice, of playing a role, rather than being what one supposedly is. The drag artiste is not a woman, but a “woman.” As Sontag explains, “Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a “lamp;” not a woman, but a “woman.” To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theatre (Sontag 1964)”.

Collective identity

In addition to being entertaining, Camp and outrageous, the drag scene in Special Period Havana has an important social function in reinforcing a collective identity in a society where such collective identities were discouraged, and where there were rarely any social spaces, organisations, or other outlets to reinforce them. "Drag shows reinforce a collective identity among gay men and lesbians" claims Kaminsky (2003:20). The drag scene in Special Period Havana is one of the best examples for this, creating and maintaining a collective identity.

This platform drag offers in our case for expressing protest against repression and against social conventions, is strongly related to its inherited subversive character. Butler sees drag as a challenge to subjective or singular identity and manifestation of the concept that "there is a 'one' who is prior to gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender decides with deliberation which gender it will be today" (Butler 1993: 21). Not only "deliberation" is involved in drag, but intentional "manipulation." As Butler puts it, drag performance "can only be understood through reference to what is barred from the signifier within the domain of corporeal legibility" (ibid.:24). Drag not only expresses queer resistance to heterosexual binarism, but brings to light the very instability of this binarism. "The critical promise of drag does not have to do with the proliferation of genders...but rather with the exposure of the failure of heterosexual regimes ever fully to legislate or contain their own ideals," writes Butler (ibid.:26).

Another socio-psychological aspect of drag as a signifier of collective identity is its association with liminality, inhabiting an "in-between" world, ambiguous and queer. In this way, drag gives space to in-between individuals and segments in society (including homosexuals), but also signifies Cuban society as a whole, a society "in-between" different identities (European/Latin/Caribbean, black/white; racist/egalitarian, free-spirited/oppressed, atheist/Christian/pagan, socialist/capitalist).

Acceptance

The status of drag queens in Cuba and in the Latin world differs from that of the United States and Western Europe where they are marginalised, viewed as a sort of "freak

show” and as perverse by heterosexuals or as “cheap and tacky” by metropolitan gays.¹⁶⁴ In Havana, I have encountered much less resentment to drag queens both within and outside of the *ambiente*. In the absence of visual gay symbols and role models, as well as divas as mentioned above, drag queens became symbols and signifiers of gay identity in Cuba. In many *fiestas* I attended, the highlight of the evening was a drag show.¹⁶⁵ As Yulieski (22) tells me, “[w]e like to see them or even be seen with them, as they are in a way our ‘flag’ of being gay, but they are the extreme edge of homosexuality, and we are not attracted to them, nor want to be like them” (PersCom 1999).

In 2006, two (non-gay) Cuban friends of mine proudly introduced me to Kiriam, a transsexual who performed regularly at Bar de Las Estrellas and became a “celebrity” after appearing in the 2005 Spanish-produced film “Havana Blues” (chosen for the role by the Cuban Film Institute). Indeed, the general acceptance in Havana’s *ambiente* of drag, which in Eurocentric gay scenes is often dismissed as “poor taste” by straights and gays alike--is one of the unique features of Havana’s gay *ambiente*.

The role of music in Havana’s drag shows: entertainment, identification, and protest

"A drag queen needs music like a fish needs water. To survive, to express herself, and to become what she is. Without music, she is just a pathetic grotesque transvestite, a pervert, but with music, she is a star.." (Amanda, drag queen, PersCom 2003)

Recent research about drag in different cultures has concentrated on of identity, gender, and performance. Very little attention has been paid to the musical aspect of drag.¹⁶⁶ I argue that music is the very core of the drag experience. A drag show without music is nothing more than cross-dressing or slapstick. In addition to providing the vital framework of the performance, the songs performed, provide a crucial source for queer interpretations, gay identity formation, expression, and intensification of feelings, and escapism, among the audience. This section investigates the role of music in the drag

¹⁶⁴ Unless it is performed by celebrity stars such as Paul O’Grady in the United Kingdom (a.k.a. “Lily Savage”) or Australian comedian Barry Humphries (“Dame Edna Everage”).

¹⁶⁵ Video: Appendix II/22.

¹⁶⁶ With the exception of Kaminski’s 2003 PhD dissertation: “Listening to Drag: music, performance and the construction of oppositional culture”, cited and quoted here.

scene in Havana during the Special Period in particular.

Drag queens challenge and destabilise conservative, pre-queer gender conventions by dressing up as women and by lip-synching to female vocals, exploiting the contrast with their real voice, which they deliberately deepen when they speak between numbers (Kaminski 2003:113). However, it is the music used in the shows that empowers the performers and the audience, affects the space-creating, and has “the power to elicit a behavioural and emotional response” (ibid.:117). Music has “a recognizable social content” (DeNora 2000:13), and is therefore “a cue for behaviour” (Kaminski 2003:113).

Amanda tells me:

The music elevates us [drag queens] to a world of glamour and illusion, of fantasy, of diva-ism, of feeling and emotion, of identification. We, together with the audience identify with the lyrics, the feelings of the music, the emotion. The make up and clothes are one layer of obtaining power, but the music is the most important source of power. (PersCom 2003).

In the Malecón I encountered a group of young deaf guys who communicated via sign-language. I invited them to some of the spaces I was investigating, to try and experience, through them, a musical space without the music. They could feel the vibrations of drumming in *santería* and of the sound-system in the *fiestas*, and could even enjoy the visual side of the ballet and experience the eye contact activity in the audience. The performance style activity which seemed to be the one “missed out” by the deaf crowd was the drag show. In spite of its strong visual aspect--although their initial reaction watching the drag queens coming on-stage dressed up was of amusement, just like the rest of the audience, the show soon became “boring and meaningless” For them without hearing the music. Music is the substance that turns drag shows from a “travesty,” a freak/grotesque performance, into a social space that conveys identity, mutual feelings, and experience.

Elizabeth Kaminski examines “the role of drag show music in building an oppositional culture” (2003:11). She comes to the conclusion that “[t]hrough music and performance, drag shows provide a space in which performers and audience members alike create new discourse and ways of thinking about gender and sexuality” (Kaminski 2003:123). By analysing drag-performances and the lyrics of songs used in drag shows in Ohio and Florida, Kaminski comes to the conclusion that “drag queens make use of popular songs to build solidarity, evoke a sense of injustice, and enhance feelings of

agency among audience members--three dimensions of cognition that constitute a collective action framework, conducive to social protest” (2003:ii).

Kaminski’s research concentrates on the U.S. drag scene, but it introduces common elements which are relevant to this case. This raises the question whether drag can be looked upon as a global phenomenon with similar social roles, or should be examined in a local perspective, whereas in each society it has a different background and different roles, related to tradition, culture, women rights, religion, homosexuality, and so forth. My answer is that both approaches are equally valid and should be investigated.

Kaminski classifies her data of songs used in drag shows into three categories. First are songs that utilise sympathy, sorrow, and humor to build solidarity. These include songs that are intended to educate heterosexuals about gay life as well as songs that parody heterosexuality. Second are songs that express rage and anger over dominant conceptions of gender and sexuality, thus fostering a sense of injustice. Third are songs that heighten audience members’ perceptions of agency by portraying images of powerful women and demonstrating the ability to live one’s life outside of hegemonic gender and sexual constraints (2003:ii,iii). The themes of drag-show songs in Havana were similar.

However, in Special Period Havana, I would add another category to the above list: songs that indirectly criticise the regime and society and portray the hardships of life in a comical way. Havana drag shows also function as the only “tolerated” outlet of political and social satire in a country which strongly restricts it, providing a certain “freedom of speech” otherwise non-available. In the many drag shows I attended, I registered direct and indirect references to the following issues: the archaism and irrelevance of the revolutionary rhetoric and institutions, the homophobia of the regime and the Cuban people, the police harassment; the scarcity of basic goods and hardships of life during the Special Period, the frequent blackouts in Havana during the mid-1990s, the practice of *resolver*, the submissiveness of Cubans to the authorities, race and racism, prostitution and *jineterismo*, tourist-local relationships, and the growth of religious practice (*santería*) and the strong presence of gays in it. For example, in Chapter 6 I describe an interpretation given by a drag queen to the *reggaetón* hit “La gasolina” turning it into criticism on life during the Special Period and the need to resolve to *jineterismo*. In another occasion, in a private underground drag *fiesta* (2006) I saw a drag queen “performing” Carlos Puebla’s

patriotic song in honour of Ché Guevara “Hasta siempre comandante”. He/she imitated an “old time” revolutionary Sierra-Maestra fighter dressed in drabby uniform, smoking marijuana and playing a guitar and whenever mentioning Guevara’s name , he/she made rude gestures indicating he was a ‘sissy’ who liked “taking it from beyond.” This followed an introduction about Ché Guevara’s reputation as a homophobe.

Julian, a 32-years-old U.S. drag artiste visiting Havana, whom I met in 2003 in Bar de Las Estrellas, commented:

In the West we use drag to express our criticism over the conservative concepts of gender and sexuality, but here in Cuba they seem to use it even more to criticise the regime and the society in general. They are taking the piss of Cuban society and the way it behaves during the crisis, and of their leaders (PersCom 2003).

Yasmani and his drag queen friends helped me compile a list of the songs used most by drag queen in Havana in 2006, and the singers who are the most popular subjects for impersonation. Similar to drag queens in the U.S. and the UK, the Cuban drag queens impersonate two main kinds of female artists: the old- time divas, such as Olga Guillot, La Lupa and Elena Burke (see Chapter 10); or current female superstars who are known for their unual powerful vocality, or project power or controversial stage attitude, “powerful women who are subjects of adoration and envy” (Yasmani, PersCom 2006). The second kind includes, in addition to “international” superstars and global “drag show heroines” such as Barnara Streisand, Whitney Huston, Celine Dion and Madonna, popular female singers from the Hispanic world known for their “over the top” romantic and dramatic performance such as Spanish singer Rocío Jurado, and Argentinian Valeria Lynch,as well as young female Hispanic superstars such as Chenoa and Malú.

The repertoire of impersonated female singers includes also Cuban female singers who defected, and as a result were banned from the state-owned airwaves, thus creating a layer of protest and resistance to the regime in the drag shows. The most popular defecting anti-Castro divas whom I often heard impersonated in drag shows are Olga Guillot, La Lupe, Celia Cruz, Gloria Estefan, and those who defected in the early 1990s Albita Rodriguez, Maggie Carles and Annia Lianres. Drag queen Mariela tells me: “When I do [impersonate] Maggie Carles or Annia Linares, or Gloria [Estefan] and even Olga [Guillot] I feel the extra energy and power. I do not only resist the stigma of being

gay or dressing up as a woman, but also the resistance to ‘*el barbudo*’ [the ‘bearded one’, Fidel Castro]”

Here are examples of some of the newer popular songs I heard repeatedly performed by drag queens during my research period and Yasmani and his colleagues confirmed are among the “favorites” of Havana’s drag queens. Just like the bolero songs described in chapter 10, these songs are characterised by melodramatic lyrics sung in second person to an ambiguous object and include some “secret codes” which can receive a “queer interpretation”.

Rocío Jurado’s “Como yo te amo” (How much I love you) is not only a powerful melodramatic love song, but hints at “impossible love” and “dangerous love”, and even “superhuman love”, themes gays associate with gay love (especially when falling in love with a heterosexual man):

*Yo, te amo con la fuerza de los mares,
yo, te amo con el ímpetu del viento,
yo, te amo en la distancia y en el tiempo,
yo, te amo con mi alma y con mi carne...
yo, te amo de una forma sobrehumana
yo, te amo en la alegría y en el llanto
yo, te amo en el peligro y en la calma*

I, I love you with the force of the seas,
I, I love you with the impetus of the wind,
I, I love you in the distance and in the time,
I, I love you with my soul and my flesh....
I, I love you in a superhuman way
I, I love you in joy and in sorrow
I, I love you in danger and in calm... ¹⁶⁷

“Cuando tú vas” (when you leave), another popular drag standard by Argentinian-born Spanish star Chenoa, not only reiterates the “central theme” of being abandoned and betrayed (see also chapter 10), but includes reference to sex and safe sex practices which receive a particular strong meaning in a gay connotation and in the drag shows I attended were accompanied by blatant body gestures. The choir goes:

¹⁶⁷ From “Como yo te amo” (The way I love you), sung by Rocío Jurado. My translation. See video in Appendix II/12

*Y no me hables de sexo seguro
Ni plastifiques mi corazón
Ya estoy cansada de cuerpos duros
Y mentes blandas que no saben de amor*

And don't talk to me about safe sex
Neither try to cover my heart in plastic
I am tired of hard bodies [The drag queen makes an arm gesture indicating an erect penis]
And soft minds that do not know how to love.¹⁶⁸

Kaminski talks about the creation of new discourse and ways of thinking about gender and sexuality, via the world of drag (Kaminski 2003:123), and one of the ways is by emphasizing and exaggerating “femininity” in the drag show. A popular tactic is choosing songs that specifically say in their lyrics “I am a woman” and performing them in drag. Barbara Streisand’s song “Woman in Love” written by Barry and Robin Gibb is a good example of such a song that became a “drag show standard”. In the repertoire of the drag queens in Bar de Las Estrellas I found the song “Yo soy una mujer de carne y hueso” (I am a woman of flesh and bones) by Maggie Carles, with lyrics that acquire another meaning when performed by a man in drag and “queer appropriated”:

*Soy así, como soy
Con mi forma de actuar
Soy feliz como estoy
Y no voy a cambiar*

I am so, as I am,
With my way of acting [also, *modus operandi*]
I am happy to be as I am
And I don't want to change.¹⁶⁹

Maggie Carles, one of the most popular subjects for impersonation in drag queens during the Special Period, has fled Cuba and as a result was banned from Cuban media since 1993. In many of her songs she passionately evokes the “good times” in pre-

¹⁶⁸ From “Cuando tú vas” (When you leave), sung by Chenoa. My translation. Video: Appendix II/15

¹⁶⁹ From “Yo soy una mujer de carne y hueso” (I am a woman of flesh and bones), sung by Maggie Carles. My translation. Video: Appendix II/18

revolutionary Cuba (Hernandez 2011).¹⁷⁰ This inherited nostalgia resonated with one of the central themes in this thesis. It was mentioned in Chapter 5 in connection with the character of Diego in “Strawberry and Chocolate” who represents the “old generation” gays who cherish and preserve pre-revolution Cuban heritage and artistic values, and will be further discussed in Chapter 10 in the context of Bolero.

On a similar subject of a ‘subversive’ kind of “local patriotism”, one particularly interesting interpretation I heard performed in many drag shows, is of one of the most known Cuban post-revolution “standards” “Ojalá” (I wish, I hope), by top *nueva trova* singer-songwriter Silvio Rodríguez. (The most favoured version for “impersonated” interpretations of this song is that of Annia Linares).¹⁷¹ The song’s sentimental and melodramatic lyrics, resonate well with the “over the top” drama of drag shows:

*Ojalá se te acabe la mirada constante
La palabra precisa, la sonrisa perfecta
Ojalá pase algo que te borre de pronto
Una luz cegadora, un disparo de nieve
Ojalá por lo menos que me lleve la muerte
Para no verte tanto
para no verte siempre
En todos los segundos, en todas las visiones
Ojalá que no pueda tocarte ni en canciones*

I wish you ran out of your consistent look,
the precise word, the perfect smile,
I wish something would happen that will erase you suddenly:
a blinding light, a shot of snow.
or at least that death take me,
So I don’t see you much
so I don’t see you ever,
in all the seconds, in all the visions
I hope that I will not be able to touch you even in my songs.¹⁷²

And from the drama, nostalgia and Camp of drag shows, to that of Swan Lake and Giselle in the Ballet company run by Cuba’s no. 1 diva...

¹⁷⁰ Source: “Singer maggies carles & her love for Cuba” by HeLson Hernandez, IN *Havana Times*, 29.3.2011. <http://www.havanatimes.org/?p=40501> (accessed 2.6.2012)

¹⁷¹ Video: Appendix II/13

¹⁷² From "Ojalá " (I wish, I hope), written by Silvio Rodríguez. My translation.

Photos: drag shows



8.1 Veteran drag queen Samantha de Monaco at Bar de Las Estrellas
(Photo: Moshe Morad, 2000)



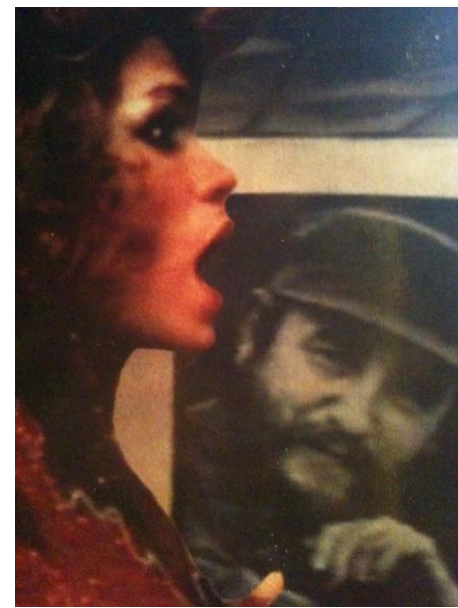
8.2 Customer “tipping” drag queen at Bar de Las Estrellas. (Photo: Moshe Morad, 2003)



8.3 Drag show at Bar de Las Estrellas, while host Samantha de Monaco is “taking a rest” (Photo: Moshe Morad, 2003)



8.4 Fifi (back) and Gloria (front) in a “neighbourhood” drag show in a private home in Old Havana. (Photo: Moshe Morad 2005).



8.5 (*top left*) Drag queen Kiriam, star of the Spanish-produced film "Havana Blues" (chosen for the role by the Cuban Film Institute). (Photo Moshe Morad 2007)

8.6 (*top right*) Drag queen Gloria, star of the home drag show described in this chapter (Photo: Moshe Morad 2005)

8.7 (*bottom left*) Yasmani, ("Brunette") drag-artist and one of my main drag-scene informants, after his show (Photo: Moshe Morad, 2003). [All above photos taken and used with permission]

8.8 (*bottom right*) Drag queen and Fidel Castro, drag show in worker's union party. Taken from the film "Mariposas en el andamio" (Butterflies on the Scaffold, 1995)

The Ballet Nacional, "The most obvious discreet gay space in Havana"

Ballet Nacional de Cuba was founded in 1948 and still led by Cuban *prima ballerina absoluta* Alicia Alonso (born 1920) in 1948, and is considered one of the world's leading ballet companies. Its performances in the Gran Teatro de La Habana¹⁷³ is another stage performance sphere which became a gay space in Havana. In this case it is a "space within a space," hidden within the larger context, hinted at, appropriated, and sometimes even unnoticed by outsiders using the same space. Still, as many of Havana's gays indicated to me in our conversations, it is one of the more popular gay "cruising" options in Havana. The investigation of ballet here is rather "queer" in its on way, as in spite of being part of a music thesis, it does not look into the music and dance performed on stage but rather at the "performance" which takes place within the audience.

The status of ballet in Cuba

In Cuban society, ballet has a unique privileged status. This status explains its heavy sponsoring, making tickets affordable and accessible to locals. Foreigners pay about \$22 US for their tickets (best seats), and Cubans pay the equivalent of \$0.11–0.26 US. This makes ballet the prime meeting space for those Cuban gays who dislike the *fiestas* and other spaces in which they have to compete with tourists for local gay guys. For a Cuban, it is cheaper to go to the ballet than to a *fiesta* and therefore a much better place for local-to-local gay interaction, free of *jineteros*:

In the *fiestas* I have no chance to meet a young Cuban guy, with all the rich tourists around. And most of the guys there are *jineteros*. The same at Rojelio Conde [Bar de Las Estrellas], which I cannot afford, unless a foreigner invites me, and then I am stuck with him. I have a much better chance to meet a serious genuine Cuban guy at the ballet (Tomasito, 45, PersCom 1999) .

Ballet is a highly encouraged and supported art form in Cuba and the Ballet Nacional de Cuba is one of the most known ballet troupes in the world. Since the

¹⁷³ See location in Fig. 4.2 and photo 8.9

Revolution's early years, Fidel Castro has encouraged ballet training across the island, including the provinces and rural areas. On 17 February 2003, *Granma*, the official Cuban daily newspaper, reported on Castro's visit to the theatre to honour the premier of "Tocororo", a ballet performance by Cuba's most famous ballet dancer Carlos Acosta.¹⁷⁴

"Tocororo" tells the story of a young *guajiro* boy whose dream is to become a ballet dancer in Havana. Fidel "manifested his confidence that the country's current cultural and educational policies will enable more children, like the lead role in *Tocororo*, to find new and better horizons through dance" (*Granma* 2003).¹⁷⁵ According to Carlos (35), a Cuban choreographer, it is a known fact that Fidel's strong support of the national ballet is due to his personal friendship with Alicia Alonso, Cuba's prima ballerina, director and choreographer of the Cuban national ballet, now in her eighties and almost completely blind (PersCom 2000). Alonso was a strong opponent of the pre-revolution Batista regime and an enthusiastic supporter of the Revolution, and among the first to receive financial support from Fidel Castro's government (only two months after the Revolution ended), in order to establish a dance school and the Ballet Nacional. She tells that in 1958 she received a message from Fidel Castro sent from his hideout in the Sierra Maestra, asking her to head the ballet company when his guerrilla army triumphed (O'Keeffe 2008).¹⁷⁶

In spite of the regime's embrace, or perhaps because of it, some ballet dancers admitted to me that, although being gay is acceptable among the audience, when it comes to the male dancers themselves, there are still many gay ballet dancers who are in the closet. I was secretly told about a homophobic vibe at the Ballet Nacional, where apparently Alicia Alonso discourages any gay relationships and "outing" in the company.¹⁷⁷ Miguel (23), who was a ballet dancer at the Ballet Nacional, told me:

You will be surprised but most of the [male] dancers are straight or pretend to be, and you always hear anti-gay remarks. I knew about two other gay dancers in the group but they

¹⁷⁴ Photo: 8.10.

¹⁷⁵ Source: Digital Granma Internacional <http://www.granma.cu/ingles/feb03/lu177asiste.html> (accessed: 1.1.2009)

¹⁸² Source: <http://embacu.cubaminrex.cu/Portals/7/Interview.doc> (accessed 11.7.2010)

¹⁷⁶ Source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2008/jun/27/filmandmusic1.filmandmusic7> (accessed 28.8.2010).

¹⁷⁷ Reinaldo Arenas parodies Alicia Alonso in "El Color del Verano" and calls her: "Halisia" (1991:227)

were in the closet. Including me. ... I remember sometimes seeing some nice man in the audience staring at me, but I although I was interested in him I was careful that the other dancers don't notice the eye contact going on (PersCom 2001).

Gaydar, space and "performance" in the audience

The "gay space" in this case is primarily in the audience. I have attended seven different performances of the Ballet Nacional and have noticed a thriving gaydar activity, cruising, and gay socialising already under way while waiting in line, though in a discreet way since it is still "outdoors." This activity increases in the hall, being a more "secure" space, and becomes very obvious in the bar during the intermission. During five different Ballet Nacional performances (from 30 minutes prior to the commencement of the show through 30 minutes after the conclusion), I have counted the number of obvious gay interactions or instances of "gaydar" eye-contact in the audience:

1. 45 (1999)
2. 57 (1999)
3. 36 (2003)
4. 42 (2005)
5. 68 (2005)

On average: 49 "eye contacts" per show. There were just as many in the early years of my fieldwork, as in the later ones.

It is not only Cuban gays who consider the ballet as one of the prime gay meeting places, but this is the popular conception among intellectual heterosexuals as well. When I asked Alfredo (45), a heterosexual musician, ballet composer and writer, about where gays in Havana hang around, his answer was: "The young uneducated ones in the Malecón, and the educated ones in the ballet" (PersCom 1999). When asked in one interview if there are meeting places for gays in Havana, The film "Strawberry and Chocolate"'s star José Perugorría (who is heterosexual, unlike his role in the film as Diego), answered:

Well, look, there's no open place like that for meetings of gays and lesbians. But there are places where their presence is felt very strongly. For example, if you go to the García Lorca Theatre [the main auditorium of the Gran Teatro], which is the theatre of the Cuban National Ballet, there are a lot of homosexual ballet and dance aficionados (Birringer, Cineaste 1996:71).

One of my informants, Raúl (37), has worked for many years as an usher in the Gran Teatro. He himself is not gay but “has many gay friends.” When asked to describe the gay cruising scene in the theatre during performances of the Ballet Nacional as “discreet” or “obvious,” he answered, “[i]t is the most obvious discreet gay space in Havana” (PersCom 2006).

An important characteristic of the ballet, which makes it a gay *space*, is its escapist nature. From many conversations with Cuban gay ballet aficionados, I extracted four primary expressions/meaning units when referring to ballet: “European,” “*internacional*,” “escape,” and “glamorous.” The European aura of the ballet provides an escapist and *internacional* gateway for Havana’s gays from their dreary life, many of whom feel trapped on the island, without any chance to travel or emigrate. They dream of life in Europe as a cradle of art and culture. It is interesting to note that while the “ideal” escape or dream destination for life outside Cuba for most heterosexual Cubans and young (under 25 years old) gays I interviewed was the United States; many of the older gays I interviewed said they would rather live in Europe—especially France, Italy, or Spain. The ballet, which according to my survey appeals to gays over 25 years old, provides an escapist solution to life during the Special Period, based on a “European dream.”

I love going to the ballet because I can be myself there. I can close my eyes and dream I am in Paris or Venice, and enjoy the beauty of the music and the dances, feel romantic, in another world, so different from my street in Centro Havana. But I also like it because there are many good-quality Cuban men there, unlike in the Malecón. If you see a man alone in the ballet, or with only male friends, you know he is gay (Tomasito, 45, PersCom 1999).

Summing up this section, the status of ballet in Cuba and its role as a gay space is governed by many paradoxes, as viewed from a Western perspective. In addition to the paradoxical embrace of the homophobic regime, described above, it is worth pinpointing two other paradoxes or unique features of Cuban ballet as a gay space. One is the fact that ballet, the global image of which is elitist, “arty,” and expensive, in Havana is not only cheap and affordable to all, but also provides a local-to-local gay meeting place, and a space for expressing gay identity that is more “purely Cuban” and free from *jineterismo* and financial gain than the street and the popular *fiestas*. The second is the shifting of the epicentre of the gay space from the stage, to the auditorium and audience. Unlike other

countries, where male ballet dancers are presumed to be gay and the audience is predominantly upper-class and heterosexual (especially where classical ballet is concerned), in Havana it is quite the opposite; male dancers are not stigmatised as gay, whereas the audience consists of many gays, some quite blatant in their attire, antics, and mannerisms, but most discreetly using eye-contact. The ballet auditorium teems with discreet (albeit obvious to the insider), gaydar interaction and homo-social activity, a “gay space” embedded in a “normative” heterosexual space, a space within a space.

Conclusion

In a mini survey conducted in 2000, I asked the same forty gay men who attend both ballet and drag shows on a regular basis if they go purely for fun, or for artistic pleasure (option 1); or if they also feel they need to go as part of their gay identity, that is, “I also go because I am gay, as a declaration of gay identity, and in order to meet other gays (socialising)” (option 2). The results were as follows:

Drag shows:

Option 1 (fun/pleasure only): 12 (30%)

Option 2 (fun/pleasure + gay identity/socialising): 28 (70%)

Ballet:

Option 1 (fun/pleasure only): 14 (35%)

Option 2 (fun/pleasure + gay identity/socialising): 26 (65%)

(mini survey 2000)

These results confirmed my conclusion about the role of these stage performance spheres in providing a space for the amalgamation of gay identity in Special Period Havana. It shows that almost 70% of gay men who go to the ballet and drag shows believe that these spheres combine a declaration of social identity along with aesthetic pleasure.

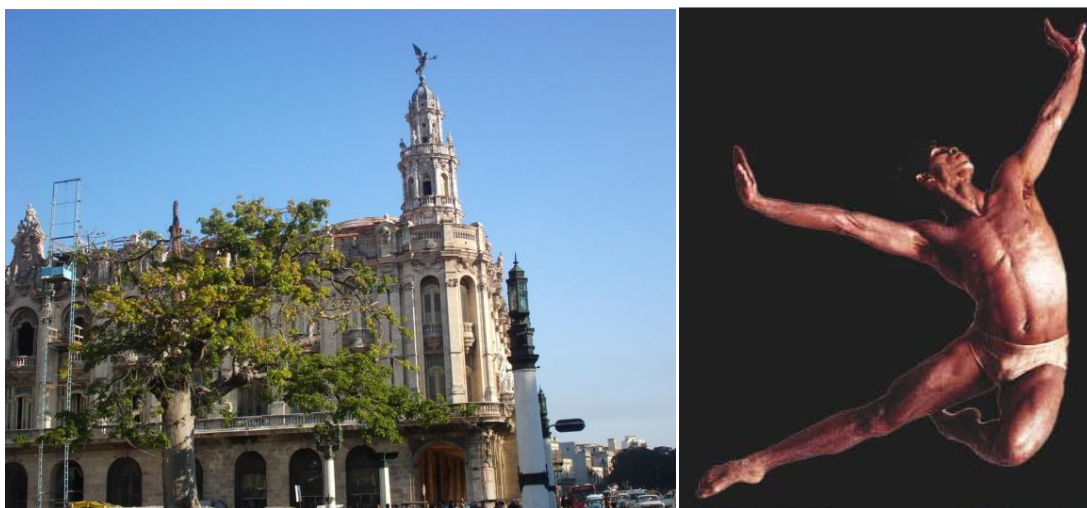
One of my informants, Manuel, a 37 year-old gay pharmacist, regularly attends both drag shows and the ballet. He took me on a Saturday night to yet another performance of *Giselle*, Alicia Alonso’s favourite piece, by the Ballet Nacional in the Gran Teatro, and

later we went to a drag show at the Bar de Las Estrellas. On our way, when I asked him to describe his experience of both spaces, he provided the best summary to this chapter:

Of course the ballet and Rojelio Conde [Bar de Las Estrellas] are completely different experiences. When I go to the ballet I dress up nicely, very elegant, and put on my special perfume which I received as a gift from my German *amigo* (and it is almost finished), and I feel elated. I often go alone to the ballet and hope to meet there the man of my dreams, maybe even a mature and educated Cuban like myself. Money is not everything in life. Now, going to Rojelio Conde [drag show] is a different story. I will never go there alone, always with a group of friends and a tourist or two who can afford the price and the rum. I wear more outrageous clothes sometimes--more “gay” if you know what I mean, and jewellery. I drink there a lot and laugh. I don’t really expect to find anyone, just to have a good time and a good laugh, behave like a *loca*, which I wouldn’t dare doing anywhere else, and forget the daily *lucha* [struggle], but sometimes I find myself exchanging telephone numbers with a tourist who was there. We gays love this world--*el chow*! We love to see the dancers, the drag queens, we love the *chow*, but if you have good sensors you will notice that the real *chow* is not on the stage but in the audience... [a rolling laugh] (Manuel, 37, PersCom 2001).

This chapter tied together two very different spheres of stage performances. Most of the chapter was dedicated to the phenomenon of drag shows, a performance sphere globally associated with gay identity and queer culture. A smaller part was dedicated to a unique phenomenon of Havana’s *ambiente*—the creation of a “gay space” within the audience of ballet performances, and more specifically performances of the Ballet nacional de Cuba in the Gran Teatro in Central Havana.

Another, very different, sphere included in this part of the thesis dedicated to performance/performativity spaces, is *santería* religion and its ceremonies whose “gay friendliness” and push-and-pull factors for gay practitioners, making it a “gay space”, will be described and discussed in the next chapter.



8.9 (*top left*) Gran Teatro de La Habana, home of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba.
(Photo: Moshe Morad, Havana 1999)

8.10 (*top right*) Cuban ballet superstar Carlos Acosta (Source:
<http://www.exploredance.com/pressphotos/balletcubacantov2.jpeg> accessed 1.5.2010)

8.11 (*bottom*) Tommy, One of Havana's notorious *locas*, once Carlos Acosta's teacher and ballet choreographer, now organising many private gay *fiestas* in his picturesque Central Havana home, here with a young *protégé* (Photo: Moshe Morad 2003. Photo taken and used with permission)



Photos 8.12, 8.13 (top) The next generation of Cuban ballet stars is fostered by the government. Young dancer during a rehearsal in Havana (Photo: Moshe Morad 2003).

Photo 8.14 (bottom) Gay Cuban ballet dancers and informants. (Photo and Hebrew Coke T-shirt regalo: Moshe Morad, Havana 2005. Photo used with permission)

Chapter 9

Performance, performativity, and audience, Part II - Changó versus Santa Barbara: Santería ritual performance as a gay space.

I feel that *santería* is a religion for people who are not so perfect. ... People who are not like regular people fit into this religion very well, because it does not discriminate against your sex or what you do for a living. Even prostitutes come to *santería*. ... I feel that *santería* is a religion with which I can identify as a gay person (Gerardo Reiner, interviewed by Lerner 1995).

Introduction

Description: A “gay” toque

On December 4th, 1999, Changó’s feast day, I was invited to attend a *toqué* (music ceremony) given in his honour in a courtyard at Guanabacoa.¹⁷⁸ The drumming, audible from a distance, led us to the courtyard where about 100 worshippers were already in full motion, dancing and singing. Unlike other *santería* events and ceremonies I had attended, the majority of the participants were men. The drumming was loud and intoxicating, and the dances were powerful and masculine, characterised by abrupt staccato movements, imitating Changó the virile warrior, the god of thunder. “They all look so macho, but most of them are gay,” Javier, the *santero* who had invited me to the event, whispered in my ear. I had attended other *santería* ceremonies since my first visit to Havana in 1995, and noticed the particularly high presence of effeminate gay men among the worshippers, but this experience was unique in its “gayness:” it was taking place in a “gay” house (as defined by Javier) and was led by a *babalao* rumoured to be gay himself (although there is a taboo preventing homosexual men from becoming *babalaos*). Besides the men, I noted the presence of some transsexuals and transvestites in the audience.

¹⁷⁸ A suburb of Havana, known for the strong presence of *santería* activity. (See map in Fig. 4.2)

During the ceremony, after about one hour of incessant drumming, some of the dancers went into a state of trance and *orisha* possession was beginning to occur. The “possessed” had their eyes shut and started going into spasms. One of them, a 25-year-old very masculine-looking gay man (later he was introduced to me as Elio) started breathing heavily and making facial and body gestures reminiscent of someone who is being sexually penetrated, followed by abrupt movements as if being pushed from one side to another. He suddenly changed his body language drastically and started moving in a very delicate feminine manner imitating with his arms and body sea waves movements. All of his body language changed from the masculine and abrupt movements when dancing “Changó” dances earlier in the evening, to soft, round and feminine motions. Javier whispered: “He is possessed by Yemayá”¹⁷⁹.

This particular “gay” *toque*, and many ceremonies to follow¹⁸⁰, were discovered and attended by “word of mouth” and a constantly growing network of gay *santería* informants. This not only opened my eyes and ears to the phenomenon of *santería* as a gay space, but paved the way for my grounded theory methodology, and helped me to conceptualise my findings and frame them theoretically, using other *santería* and Afro-Diasporic religion sources as references.¹⁸¹ The following sections feature descriptions and analysis evolving from my field experience and this grounded theory methodology.¹⁸²

Description: Il rito del cuchillo (The ceremony of the knife)

In 2000 I attended a completely different kind of ceremony. Lourdes, my main *santería* informant, invited me to an animal-sacrifice ceremony in her house at Regla¹⁸³. It was given in honour of a celebration for the religious “birthday” of a *santo*, a year after his first initiation in the *asiento* (installation, putting in place) ceremony. During the

¹⁷⁹ The *orisha* of the sea-waters, a symbol of maternity and womanhood and a favourite of gay devotees.

¹⁸⁰ During my fieldwork I attended 22 *santería* ceremonies of various kinds.

¹⁸¹ Some are mentioned in the literature review (Chapter 2).

¹⁸² Video clips in Appendix II: 24 -*Toque* for *Changó* with possession; 25. Dance representation of *Yemayá*; 26 & 27 – Dance representations of *Changó*

¹⁸³ A suburb of Havana, known for the strong presence of *santería* activity. (See map in Fig. 4.2)

“ceremony of the knife,” the initiate is further initiated into the world of animal-sacrifice, and from that day on he is allowed to ritually slaughter four-legged animals.

On a small roof terrace at Lourdes’ house, nine goats (one for each *orisha*), eighteen chickens and doves, and a sea turtle are ceremonially sacrificed in a small room. The chief priest, the *babalao*, cuts each animal’s throat and spills the blood on the ceremonial stones while the participants chant, beat rhythms in various improvised percussion methods--hand-clapping, beating on doors, boxes and tables, and swaying to the rhythm. The most gruesome job, however, is conducted by half a dozen male *santeros*. First, they carry the live animals into the slaughter corner. In the case of the goats, before entering the sacred room the *santero* extracts the male animals’ genitals. After the ceremonial slaughter the *santero* carries the bleeding animal out to the roof and starts stripping its skin, extracting its warm entrails, separating them and laying them back on the floor on the stripped skin.

Many of the *santeros* carrying this gruesome job were homosexual. “Gaydar” and eye contact activity was taking place, Camp antics and remarks and even flirting were openly exchanged between the *santeros* to the amusement of the female participants. In photo 9.7 I captured a moment after one of the gay practitioners lifted a hand holding a huge knife covered with blood in a “camp” gesture to coquettishly brush away the hair from his sweaty forehead while suggestively smiling at me.

The backroom probably symbolised more than anything else this paradoxical coexistence of Camp gay attitude and the morbid scene— it was Lourdes’ bedroom where the afternoon feast had been prepared – a massive cream cake decorated in pink was laid on the bed, while just beneath it were laid buckets of bones and entrails of the butchered animals (photo 9.9)

*

Santería is a religion in which music and dance form an integral part of the worship, the way to achieve results and to “make contact” with its deities, the *orishas*. During my fieldwork, I attended 22 *santería* ceremonies, in all of which music and dance were a central feature. performed by “professional” *batá*¹⁸⁴ drummers and a lead singer

¹⁸⁴ *Batá* are double-headed hourglass-shaped drums originating in Yorubaland. A set of three consecrated *batá* drums is

(*akpwon*), and/or by the, the integral audience¹⁸⁵, chanting, hand-clapping and using “improvised” percussion instruments such as tables or forks or drink cans.¹⁸⁶

During most *santería* ceremonies that I attended, the majority of participants consisted of women and “effeminate” gay men.. Indeed, this observation was reaffirmed by literature on the subject which confirms that *santería* attracts and accepts homosexual men more than any other African-religion practices in Cuba (Dianteill 2000:74).¹⁸⁷ This chapter looks specifically at the performative/musical aspect of this association, and shows how *santería* rituals involving religious music and dance have become a space for gay identity and interaction in Special Period Havana.

Due to its flexibility, its syncretic essence and unique social status, *santería* permits the absorption of new influences and processes from outside. This postmodernist balance of preservation and flexibility helps in our case maintain local homosexual identities, and at the same time, nurtures new hybrid ones. Strongman describes the African-Diasporic religions as

... sites of local knowledge that can serve as cultural arsenals in the resistance to these hegemonic discourses [U.S. gay identity] and as places in which Latin American homosexual identities can find the construction materials necessary to continue developing without total absorption by the hegemony of the mainstream gay and lesbian movement in the United States. (2002:176–178).

This chapter reevaluates and critiques the conceptualisation of “homosexuality” in *santería* in the existing literature and introduces a more specific term, EPH (“effeminate passive homosexual”), which, I argue, is more precise than other terms used in the literature and is a vital concept in the understanding and the analysis of the phenomenon. It introduces and discusses the “feminine” nature of *santería* as well as other concepts such as alternative kinship, secrecy, deviance and marginalisation, which nurture and

used in Yoruba religious tradition to communicate with the *orishas*. Robert Farris Thompson describes them as “sacred machines for transubstantiation, moorings for lost vessels of the spirit...creative, Creator-given...” (in Amira and Cornelius 1997:7). For extended reading on the *batá* : Villepastour (Vincent) 2010. See photo. 9.1

¹⁸⁵ As per Schechner 2003(1988):218-222. See also in Chapter 8.

¹⁸⁶ See photo 9.5

¹⁸⁷ My article “‘Invertidos’ in Afro-Cuban Religion” dedicated to this subject, was published in *The Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide* (2008. quoted in Encyclopaedia Britannica and in the GLBTQ Encyclopaedia).

facilitate the “gay” connection, in spite of taboos of different aspects of the practice towards homosexuals.

The performance aspect of the practice will then be discussed--the music, the dances, and the spirit possession, the role of gays in the performance, and how the socio-psychological themes are reflected in the performance.

At the end of this chapter I will offer a “(homo)sexual reading” of the two main performance aspects of *santería*, spirit possession, and the sacred *batá* drumming, the main acoustic feature of *santería* ceremonies. Since this thesis deals with the interpretation and subjective appropriation of cultural elements in *santería* by gays, I focus on the way in which gay *santeros* hear, feel, and interpret the drumming, rather than trying to establish a “balanced” theological approach, and therefore feel comfortable to introduce this rather controversial theory.

My intention is not to give *santería* religion in general a homocentric interpretation, but to show how Cuban gays view and identify with the philosophy and practice of the religion, how they participate in the performance of its rituals, and how it has become a space for self-expression and identity among gays in Special-Period Havana.

Santería and its music¹⁸⁸

Orisha worship

Santería, also known as *regla de ocha* and *lucumí*, is a Cuban-originated syncretic religious form deriving from the family of Yoruba-originated religious forms that emerged in the New World during the slave trade, circa 1515, among native Yoruba¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ The term “music” in the context of this chapter includes dance. Unlike Eurocentric cultures which conceptualise music and dance as two distinct performative arts African-derived cultures do not necessarily separate the two, as they are part of the same energy, expression, and purpose. This is reflected in the use of terminology in many African languages, where not only the borders between the terms used for “movement” and “dance” and “sound” and “music” are blurred, but the separation of music and dance into two different expression forms is artificial and foreign to most African traditions (Agawu 1995; Kubik 1994; Waterman 1990; Euba 1988). However, when for analytical purposes I do use the terms “music” and “dance” to describe the two different (though connected) performance aspects of *santería* worship. As Widdess puts it, “[d]ance and music can be analysed as separate but complementary channels of meaning” (2006:183).

¹⁸⁹ The Yoruba are one of the largest ethno-linguistic groups in West Africa and constitutes around 30 million people, predominantly in Nigeria (source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoruba_people. Accessed 3.3.2010). As my research has been carried out in Cuba and not in Africa, I use the Spanish orthography Yoruba, and not the Yoruba orthography Yorùbá, except where it appears in citations.

slaves who were forcibly baptised by the Roman Catholic church. The New World religions were a way of preserving their native beliefs and the practices of the African *ifá* tradition of *orishas*¹⁹⁰ worship that were firmly suppressed by the church – by amalgamating the worship in various ways with Catholic practice, and equating each *orisha* of their traditional religions with a corresponding Christian saint, such as Changó/Santa Barbara, Babalu-ayé/St Lazarus, Obatalá/Virgin of Mercy, Yemayá/Virgin of Regla, et cetera.

The religion's deities, the *orishas*, literally “head guardians”, are “multidimensional beings who represent the forces of nature, act as archetypes, and function as sacred patrons or ‘guardian angels’They represent a level of power that is approachable through ritual action” (Clark 2001:25). Some of the different dimensions, avatars, of certain *orishas* (*caminos*, paths, as they are called in *santería* discourse) bear different genders, human attributes and weaknesses, which make their sexuality and gender forms as varied and as mischievous as those of humans. The same *orisha* can have some male *caminos* and some female *caminos*. Numerous *orishas* are associated with gender complexity (including androgyny), bisexuality, pansexuality and homoeroticism (Conner 2004:65).¹⁹¹ There are *patakies*¹⁹² which tell of homosexuality and transvestism practiced by the *orishas*: “[T]here are at least ten major myths in which homosexuality plays a major role” according to Cañizares (interviewed in Lerner 1995). Furthermore “[t]he relationship of each individual in this religion with stories of the *orisha* is a very personal matter” (Schweitzer 2003:80), thus allowing different interpretations and appropriations of the *patakies*, including queer interpretations.

¹⁹⁰ The religion's deities. An explanation will follow.

¹⁹¹ Oeywumi argues that it is inappropriate to categorise an *orisha* as male or female, masculine or feminine, or androgynous, what she sees as Eurocentric definitions (Oyewumi 1997, Conner 2004:52). However, other scholars including indigenous Yoruba scholars, such as Ayodele Ogundipe, are quite at ease doing so (Oyewumi 1997:169,171; Conner 2004:52). Even if not so in Yoruba culture, in the context of Cuban *santería* discourse which appropriated many terms and concepts from the Spanish colonial heritage, it is perfectly appropriate to do so, and most acceptable as I experienced in many conversations with *santeros* and *babalaos*.

¹⁹² *patakies* (singular: *pataki*) are orally transmitted myths about the *orishas*, which serve to explain various phenomena and to teach the devotees how to please the *orishas* and gain their help.

During the Special Period

The practice of African-Diasporic religion in Cuba, which had been suppressed by the colonial authorities during slavery, was again suppressed during the 1960s and 1970s, when Cuban revolutionary ideology and nationalism opposed any religious practice and particularly considered the practice of African-Cuban religions reactionary, marginalised and even condemned it. However, in the 1990s, via processes of globalisation and “neo-folklorisation” as a result of the economic needs leading to the change in attitude towards tourism, *santería* “came out of the closet”, to use a term close to this thesis’ subject. This process can be compared to the emergence of ‘gay identity’ during the Special Period, and empowered by similar social catalysts, including the increased tourism to the island, and the emergence of commercialisation and a Capitalistic approach), with three main factors contributing to this change: the growing tolerance of the authorities towards the practice of religion¹⁹³; the financial crisis bringing people to resort to faith for solution and help; and finally, the rise in Black/African consciousness, culture and pride.

Santería not only became more popular but also increased in visibility during the Special Period. It was embraced and adopted as a national identity symbol for internal (unifying, raising the social status of black Cubans, offering comfort in stressful times) and external (tourist attraction, creating “folklore”) purposes, which made it part of Cuban national discourse. It also became heavily commercialised during this period – with anything from “*santería*” fashion garments¹⁹⁴, such as jewelry and trainers in the colour of the *orishas*, to instant “consultations” offered to tourists, and “*santería* tourism” to the island by practitioners living abroad who travel to Cuba to get initiated and attend ceremonies.¹⁹⁵ These processes are extensively discussed by Perna (2005a).

¹⁹³ Until 1991 people who practiced religion publicly, including *santeros*, were not accepted as members of the communist party. (Perna 2005a:180)

¹⁹⁴ See photo 9.12

¹⁹⁵ In 2006 I was invited to the initiation ceremony of Puerto Rican music star Jonathan “Bote” González, the bass player of popular Puerto Rican band Calle 13. The ceremony took place in a small flat in Havana. One of the participants was a professor from the University of Puerto Rico who told me: “He paid a lot of money to come and get initiated here, and had to give up some important concerts and promo work back home”. Manolo, A Puerto Rican *santero* explained: “He could do it in Puerto Rico, but to do it in Cuba is somewhat like Moslems go to Mecca to do Haj or like Jews go to Jerusalem to have a Bar-Mitzva ceremony at the Wailing Wall. Cuba is the holy land for *santeros*” (PersCom 2006).

The role of music

Fundamental to all Yoruba-originated religions is the belief that all things have an intrinsic energy called *aché*. The various strands of *aché* that emerge during the drumming, chanting and dancing, all converge during the ceremony to create a powerful link with the deities through the medium of music. The “sworn” *batá* players and the *akpwon* access *aché* to purify the ritual atmosphere, call down the *orishas* and induce spirit possession in the devotees. The music (drumming, songs and dances) in the ceremonies creates an environment of worship and communication with the *orishas* through participatory performance in which the possession occurs. The role of music in *santería* worship is, therefore, by no means secondary or purely aesthetic, but primary and integral to the religious practice, as Waterman states, “it is important that music and dance in these kind of rituals are not just seen as static symbolic objects which have to be understood in a context, but are themselves a patterned context within which other things happen” (1990:213). In our case, part of their “patterned context” is the space they provide to gay devotees.

Dance in the context of *santería* worship is related to trance and spirit possession rather than an art form, as “by its rhythm and exclusion of other external stimuli, [it] induces brain behaviours (often leading to trance or ecstasy) which underlie claims to shamanistic or divine possession. At the least, they become evidence of connection with the divine..., or of a manifestation of the divine... (Bowker, 2000 [1997]:146).

Homosexuality and *santería*

Terminology

Many researchers looking at gender/sexuality within *santería*, and its Brazilian sister religion *candomblé*, simply use the term “homosexuals,” which is inaccurate, inadequate, and misleading, when they in fact refer specifically to effeminate and sexually passive homosexuals. Even Ruth Landes’s terminology “passive homosexuals” (1947:434) is inaccurate as it simply implies a sexual behaviour and preference, but ignores the

feminine mannerisms, which play an important role in the practice. In *candomblé* discourse, the term *adé* (probably taken from *adodí*, the *Yoruba* term for homosexual) defines a "male who desires other males [and] also performs a spiritual function or fulfils a sacred role" (Conner 2004:101).¹⁹⁶ The absence of such a term in *santería* discourse leads to terminological confusion and inaccuracy. Many use the term *afeminados* (effeminate males) (Diantéill 2000) which is correct from a behavioral perspective, and relates to the feminine aspect of the religion, discussed in the next section, but ignores sexuality and the passive homosexual tendency of the worshippers, which, as I will show, is also part of the push-and-pull factors in this case. Conner describes the difficulty in applying Eurocentric terms when writing about homosexuality in Afro-Diasporic religion and uses a range of terms in different contexts, such as gay, bisexual, transgender, same-sex intimacy, queer, gender diverse ,et cetera. Inspired by Edgar Morin's "complexity theory," he uses "sexual complexity" and "gender complexity" as umbrella terms (Conner 2004:17).

Rather than getting entangled with multiple terms, or being inaccurate by simply using "gay" or "homosexual," and as this investigation focuses on the performative/behavioral aspects, and not on sexuality, I chose to use in this chapter the abbreviation EPH to specifically indicate "effeminate passive homosexual." These three qualities are common to the subjects of this chapter and manifest in their ritual performance.

An interesting concept in Diantéill's theory, one I embrace for the purpose of this investigation and will later refer to, is that of "social sex" (*sexe social*), different from biological sex, in which women and *afeminados* (EPH) belong to the same "feminine" category, and men and masculine lesbians belong to the "masculine" category. According to Diantéill's statistics, *santería* practice is 62% feminine in biological sex, and 74% in social sex, indicating 12% of all practitioners, and 32% of male practitioners, are EPHs (2000:74).

A particular section of EPH, which belongs to the feminine "social sex" category, but in cases even crosses over into the feminine biological sex group, is that of

¹⁹⁶ See Photo 9.6

transgenders of different kinds – from transvestites to partially and fully operated transsexuals.

Transgenderism

The same push-and-pull factors which attract gay men to *santería* attract also transgenders. Out of twenty-six *santeros* and *santeras* that were my main *santería* informants, three were transvestites and two were transsexuals. They were all earnest *santería* devotees, and very well-accepted and respected in their "houses"¹⁹⁷. Sierra Madero, who researched the transgender community in Havana, confirmed that many of them are attracted to, and practice, *santería* (Interview, 2006). Matory claims that transgender acceptance and respect are typical to the religions of the oppressed:

Despite the colonialists' racist attempt at cultural genocide, transvestism and other transgendered expression can still be observed in the ritual and beliefs of oppressed peoples. It is clear that they held respected public roles in vast numbers of diverse societies in cultures continents apart" (2005:215).

In the context of this thesis the concept of transgenderism can be found in various aspects of the worship and performance, thus creating a unique space of identification for transgenders. In some of the ceremonies I attended I witnessed phenomena of ritual cross-dressing and cross-gender performance, such as male *iyawós* ("brides" of the *orishas*) wearing heavy make-up and some female accessories, such as earrings and painted scarves. A similar description appears in Brown's report on a *día del medio* coronation ceremony.¹⁹⁸ Brown describes "painted gender representations of "royal heads". Male and female *iyawós* who "make" (*hacer*) female *orishas* "have a large circular earring painted on each side of the face just below the earlobe" (2003:206,207).

According to Brown, the *machismo* and double standard towards gender and sexuality in Cuba and the "vanity of male initiates" prevent male *iyawós* who "make" female *orishas* from wearing dresses and gowns, while in Yorubaland in present-day

¹⁹⁷ Existing literature mentions transsexuals and transvestites in the practice of *candomblé* in Brazil, and recently also in *santería* in the United States. Very little, though, has been written about the status of transgender in *santería* practice in Cuba. Conner explains the acceptance and even respect of what he calls "drag practitioners" by "otherwise homophobic, transgender-phobic youth" in New York owing to "their reputation as skilled diviners and powerful intermediaries" (Conner 2004:112,113).

¹⁹⁸ *El día del medio*, the "middle day" of the initiation process, is according to Morena Vega "the day the Santería community publicly acknowledges and celebrates the initiation of a new *iyawo*". (2000:244)

Nigeria "not only do male initiates wear the dresses of their female deities, in many places, the "wifely" status of the *awaro* [a priest dedicated to serving one particular *orisha*] translates into dresses and wraps and female hairstyles for all priests of all deities" (ibid).

Matory (2005) investigated the phenomenon's African roots. He quotes Sweet (1996), who "identifies west-central African transvestites, including homosexual transvestites, as an important precedent of the *adés* in *candomblé*," and illustrates a pan-African set of "core beliefs" connecting male possession priests to transvestism (Matory 2005:333). In both Sweet and Matory's observations it is not clear whether they refer to "real-life" transvestites or to cross-gender activity during the ritual; that is, men who wear women's clothes and behave "feminine" as part of the ritual and possession.

Another aspect of *santería* ritual performance which one can associate with transgenderism is spirit possession. Shorter writes: "One important aspect of spirit possession is its dramatic character. This is obviously enhanced when mental dissociation is simulated, rather than real, but all spirit possession has a theatrical quality. The medium impersonates a spirit, acting out a particular role. (Shorter 2004 [1974]:96). Impersonation and "acting out a role" are at the heart of transgenderism in its various forms. Like spirit possession, cross-dressing, and any transgender expression "transcends" one state into another by challenging physical norms.

Another interesting comment on this phenomenon was given to me by Olga, a transsexual "in the process" (i.e. not fully operated yet, as is the situation with many Cuban transsexuals I have met, awaiting the opportunity to undertake the expensive operation): "*Santería* practice is about crossing borders between the human sphere and the *orisha* sphere; and transsexualism is about crossing the border between man and woman." The liminal status of transvestites and transsexuals pushes them to the mystical and marginal character of *santería*, which also pulls them in for being "on the threshold" and therefore can be easily possessed, communicate with, and serve, the *orishas*. Wilcox claims that transgenders who are "in between," i.e. not fully operated, are more accepted in the *santería* sphere than those who are fully operated. (2006:254).

Femininity

An explanation for the "gay friendliness of the religion" I received from many of my

informants, also affirmed by literary sources, was the feminine nature of the practice. In her 1940 study on *candomblé* Ruth Landes coined the term "cult matriarchate" (1940:386–389), and even described it as "a City of Women", the title of her 1947 book. Landes claims that *candomblé* traditionally favours women, who are more suited than men, to nurse the deities (ibid. :388). Likewise, *candomblé*'s "sister religion", *santería*, is a religion practiced and run by a majority of women and based on a matriarchal and feminine perspectives (Dianteuill 2000: 74).

With the exclusion of the role of *babalao*, women have the same leadership roles as men in *santería* (Strongman 2002:185). I have noticed that during ceremonies I attended the *babalao*'s role is more ceremonial, while it is usually women who run the event. For example, In the *rito de cucillo* ceremony described above, the *babalao* was slaughtering the four-legged animals and conducting the ritual, but Lourdes, my *santera* informant was the one running the day-long event, assisted by gay *santeros*, giving orders to those present, and seemed to be the authoritative figure throughout the event.¹⁹⁹

According to Conner "the essentialization of the feminine plays a key role in African and African-diasporic expressions, especially in terms of motherhood, nurturing, and charm." (2004:10). Conner adds that gay male practitioners see themselves part of this "feminine world" (ibid.). This concept is reinforced by Dianteuill's "social sex" theory mentioned above where women and effeminate homosexuals belong to the same "feminine" category. This social closeness between women and homosexuals in *santería*, can be attributed both to the African roots, and to the *machismo* of Cuban society. Shepherd identified this kind of closeness among African cultures, such as the Swahili in Mombasa (Shepherd 252 - 253 in Caplan 1987), where homosexuals are more accounted among women than among men, are better treated by them, are considered entertaining and even cherished as, unlike the females in the women social circle, they can "come and go, and give entertaining accounts of events in the men's world where so many more interesting things happen" (Shephers 253 in Caplan 1987). As for the *machismo* aspect—the inferior social status of both effeminate gay men and women creates an alliance of the "discriminated". Another "added social value" homosexuals have in women's circles is their dependency. "A homosexual is worth more to a woman because it adds to her

¹⁹⁹ See video clip in Appendix II/23, a spirit possession ceremony dominated by women.

prestige to have dependents who are not all women and small children” (ibid.). I witnessed myself this kind of “added value dependency” among many *santeras*, who in their household and social circle of loyal dependent have other (mostly younger, but also poorer) women, children, and homosexuals.

“The fag religion”: gays in santería

My observations and the data extracted in conversations and interviews about the strong connection between *santería* and homosexuality, and the high presence of gays in *santería* practice, are reaffirmed in the literature. According to Cuban scholar Tomás Fernández Robaina, *santería* is “the most open of all African-Cuban creeds about gender and sexual orientation.”(quoted in Lumsden 1996:206).” The other Afro-Cuban religious forms popular in Cuba such as *palo monte* and *abakuá* are also highly performative and transformative, but do not offer this space, and are in fact homophobic in nature, with fewer porous boundaries open for “queer” interpretations in which gay devotees can express their identity. According to Eric K. Lerner, a gay *santero* and *santería* researcher Cubans derisively call *santería* “*esta religión de los maricones*” “that fag religion”²⁰⁰, and I can confirm hearing similar expressions in many occasions throughout my fieldwork.

It is important to make it clear that unlike religions that practice ritualised homosexuality, such as the indigenous religions in Melanesia (Herd 1993[1984]) and Papua New Guinea (Knauff 2003), where homosexual acts are performed by heterosexual men as part of a ritual, in this chapter I examine behavioural/identity aspects, and not concerned with the sexual act itself. In fact, although I heard from my informants of some incidents, I have never witnessed a sexual activity taking place during a *santería* ritual, or even during a possession. If incidents such as this occur, they are rare and not normative.

201

²⁰⁰ Eric K. Lerner, interviewed by Randy P. Conner (no date indicated). source:<http://ashejournal.com/index.php?id=20> (accessed 1.7.2007).

²⁰¹ This is based both on my own observations and on my numerous conversation with *santería* experts, worshippers and scholars. As for “Homosexual behaviour” in general, as described in this chapter—this is a debatable term, as of course, not all gays behave the same. However in the context of this investigation when I refer to behavior it is in the context of EPH practitioners whose effeminate/homosexual mannerisms are extroverted and noticeable.

However, I have witnessed (homo)sexual innuendoes and sexual symbolism in ceremonies. These innuendoes and behaviour are quite visible and in some cases I have witnessed particularly emphasised and exaggerated gestures, as well as eye-contact and “gaydar” activity among participants. Ritualistic concepts such as being “mounted” or possessed and becoming a “young bride” (*iyawó*), which will be described and explained later in this chapter, are frequently manifested through what may seem as sexual gestures, and constitute a performative aspect of the “gay space” provided by the religion. According to Mason, owing to the visual manifestations of these religious concepts, many think that “all *santeros* are gay”:

Because *orishá* priests are “taken” by the *orishás* in possession, and because all the initiates become the “younger wife” [or rather “bride”] of the *orishás*, many Cubans and Cuban Americans assume that all *orishá* priests are gay... This tension surfaces again and again in the discourse of the religion. ...Gay *orishá* priests subvert cultural norms about sexuality, but some compensate for their homosexuality’s effects on their reputations by becoming severe and rigid about ritual matters. (Mason 2002:118)

This does not necessarily mean that *santería* believers are tolerant to homosexual practices and behaviour in general. In a paradoxical way, “not all that is acceptable in the religion, is acceptable at home. People accept the role of homosexuals in the religion and even enjoy it in the rituals, but this does not mean they will accept it from their own family at home” (Miguelito, *santero*, 30, PersCom 2000). This observation only enhances the role of *santería* practice and gatherings in providing a “space” for gay *santeros*. Not everyone, however, is happy with the association of *santería* with homosexuals. From my conversation with many *santería* devotees and *santería* scholars in Cuba I have learnt that most non-gay devotees (the majority of which are women) accept it as “natural”. However, some non-gay male devotees, especially among “the elders” denounce this behaviour and find it offensive.²⁰²

The role of EPH in santería performance

Toque, bembé, guemilere, tambor are names of *santería* music ceremonies honouring the *orishas* that use drums and percussion instruments. The ceremonies often

²⁰² From my non-gay *santeros* informants only a small minority (4 out of 24, i.e., 18%) was critical of the behaviour of *afeminado santeros*, however the “tolerance” could be biased in some cases, as they had been aware of the topic of my research.

celebrate an important event in the religious life of a devotee, or performed in honour of a particular *orisha*. The first part of a *batá* ceremony is dedicated to the summoning of the *orishas*, and known as *oru del igbodu* ("ceremony in the orisha's room") or *oru seco* ("unadorned oru"). This takes place in relative privacy before the social activity begins. In this part the "salutes" to the *orishas* are played, and *bataleros* consider it the most important part of a music ceremony (Amira and Cornelius 1999:23). The main part of the "performance," however, and the one in which EPH start to perform, is the public one, following the "salutes" section, known as *oru del eyá aranla* ("ceremony in the main room") or *oru cantando* ("sung oru") in which the *akpwon* leads the chanting and each *santero* comes forward and dances while the music of his *orisha* is being played. The next section is called *iban balo* ("patio", note the symbolic movement from the private room, to the "living" room, and then to the patio). This part is more free and less formal in structure, with a greater participation of the audience, chanting and dancing, and is the part in which spirit possession is most likely to occur (ibid. :24). The *cierre* (closure, exit) is the final part, similarly to the *oru del igbodu* is instrumental only, playing the "salutes" aimed directly at the exit from the sacred time. The experience of listening to the powerful drumming during the ceremony is intoxicating even to the "outsider", as Manuel describes:

Being so accustomed to music that relies heavily on melody and harmony, I have never imagined how drumming could be so expressive. I am mesmerised by his playing, in which he repeatedly starts a basic pattern, twists it around in different syncopations, and then abandons it for another, while different duple and triple pulses in the polyrhythmic accompaniment come in and out of focus... (Manuel 2006:21)

The dances and music are not, as it may seem, improvised but are carefully planned, having strong mythological significance and meaning which "convey mental images related to the particular orisha" (Brandon 1997:147). Ortiz described the dances as being "as carefully planned as ballet" (1959:261). This requires great expertise, not only from the *batá* players and the *akpwon* but also from the devotees taking part in the dancing and spirit possession.

Based on my observations during 22 such ceremonies, I would like to suggest categorising the "performers" in *santería* worship into three categories: "professionals",

integral audience (as per Schechner 2003[1988]), and an intermediate group of “semi-professionals”, those regularly participating in the possession and dancing. The “professional” performers (a term I use for analytical purposes, but is not a term used in *santería* discourse) are the *bataleros*, who need to be “sworn” as initiated musicians with knowledge of the repertoire and inside experience with the ritual process. There is a strict religious taboo concerning the sacred *batá*, and the player cannot be a woman or a homosexual (See Appendix VIII about the *batá* gender taboos). The *akpwon*, who “summons the *orishas* with his singing” (Amed, 33, *akpwon*, PersCom 2001), likewise must be “professional” with inside knowledge of the repertoire. The *bataleros* and the *akpwon* can be “outsiders” to the particular “house” where the ceremony takes place, and in many cases they are hired for the ceremony. Their role in the ceremony is to provide the music which “brings down the *orishas* and allows the dancers to get possessed. As Stokes puts it, during the main part of the ceremony the musicians are not part of the spiritual dynamics, but they control “the ‘flow’ of the socio-musical space” (Stokes 1994:23, based on Waterman 1990). This means that unlike the dancers, the *bataleros* do not and should not get possessed. They

do not, in principle, go into trance...to do so would be incompatible with their function, which is to provide for hours on end...music whose execution must continuously adapt itself to the circumstances. It is therefore important that they should be constantly available and at the service of the ritual...Since they have never been possessed there is no fear that they will enter into trance. Paradoxically, then, these musicians, who seem to be the very pillars of possession séances and without whom possession dance would be inconceivable, are in a way external to the cult.” (Rouget 1985:103-104).

In a mini survey I conducted in 2003 I asked eight sworn *bataleros* and twelve heterosexuals the following: “Do you think a gay man can be an initiated *batalero*?” All the drummers and ten (83%) of the *santeros* answered negatively. Three of the *santeros*, however, replied: “Not if they are openly gay,” by which they meant effeminate, indicating a social rather than a religious taboo. My second question was: “why?” Surprisingly, none of those who said a definite “no” provided a religiously based answer, but cited other reasons: “They are not strong enough”, or “They are prone to fall into a trance and get ‘mounted’ [possessed]”. Strangely enough, when gay *santeros* were asked the same question, they gave similar answers. Lázaro, a “gay-friendly” Yoruba scholar and *babalao* who has a majority of openly gay male devotees in his “house”

explained:

The role of the *bataleros* is complicated and demands high concentration. They have to memorise and repeat accurately the rhythmic patterns of each *orisha* and its variations, and furthermore they need to interact with each other in complete coordination to create a complicated interlocking polyrhythm. The role of the women and the homosexuals is to be “mounted,” i.e., possessed, therefore they are not suited to playing the *batá*, which provides the technical “channeling” for the possession, and has to be detached from the dances and the possession itself (PersCom 2005).

According to Lázaro and other *santeros* with whom I discussed this, both “social genders” work on two different coordinated levels during the ceremony – males (*batá*) set the interlocking rhythm. Therefore, they have to work as a team and be as accurate as “clockwork”; females (of both sexes as per the “social sex” theory, i.e. women and EPH) – dance and hope to get possessed, therefore they work solo “in their own world” and improvise. This system can be compared to a line of set rhythm with a line of a solo instrument improvising over it. Both are needed to create the piece of music, but it must be played by two different musicians.

The reaction of one of my gay *santero* informants from Lázaro’s “house” to the possibility of homosexual *batá* players was: “We don’t want to play them [the *batá*]. That is for real men. Each one has his role. An effeminate *batá* player would be as ridiculous as a *macho guajiro* (peasant) dancing like Yemayá” (PersCom 2005).

When I challenged Lázaro “Don’t you think this is a case of gender and sexuality based discrimination?” he replied:

It’s the other way round – the male *batá* drummers are only service providers, drumming is a hard work and they have to maintain their concentration throughout the ceremony, to communicate with the *orishas* only to open the door for the possessed, who make the full contact with them [the *orishas*] and are mounted by them. They do all the hard work, but the privileged role is that of the possessed (PersCom 2005).

As for the integral audience, the “congregation”– during the ceremony all members of the audience join in the chanting and dancing (and sometimes even drumming, not the *batá*, but on different improvised percussion instruments, including forks and cutlery, soft-drink cans, et cetera.), and the entire space turns into part of the “performance”.²⁰³

²⁰³ Photo 9.5

In between the “professional” musicians and the integral audience, come the “semi-professional” performers who are members of the “house” and the integral audience and are specifically chosen or “emerge” from within the group and qualify for certain roles which hold the “theatre” segment of the “performance” – the elaborate *orisha* dances, trance and spirit possession. These may change from one ceremony to another, but usually they are the same people, and known to be trance-inducible and suitable to be possessed, or “mounted” by the *orishas*, to use the *santería* jargon.

In this sector of *santería* “semi-professionals” EPH have a central role, and this, together with the integral audience provides a “space” for gays. In contradiction to Oyewumi’s theory about the “non-importance” of gender and sexuality in Yoruba culture (1997:157),²⁰⁴ I found that gender and sexuality play an important role in *santería* “performance”. Later in this chapter I will expose the “meaning” of gender aspects in the practice itself, but even when it comes to the “performers” the gender/”social sex” division among the “performers” is clear and rigid –the *batá* players, the professional performers – only heterosexual men²⁰⁵, dancers/possessed – a high percentage of EPH and women (both groups are part of the same “social sex”) , integral audience – mixed, with a high presence of women, and a noticeable presence of EPH, depending on the specific “house” in which the ceremony takes place.

The importance of music and dance for the success of the ritual means the performers must be highly qualified. Stokes emphasises this and brings examples from different cultures (1994:5). “Without these qualities, the ritual event is powerless to make the expected and desired connections and transformations” (ibid.). I have encountered this in some of the ceremonies I attended: in many cases, “good performance” was attributed to the “gayness” of the performance. In one *toque* I attended in 2003 in honour of Yemayá in old Havana, three males and two females dressed in blue and white, Yemayá ’s colours, were dancing frantically to the drumming, imitating Yemayá “moves”--flowing,

²⁰⁴ See in Appendix IX about the Matory-Oyewumi debate.

²⁰⁵ I did not come across a restriction regarding the sexuality of the *akpwon*, and when asking my *santería* sources about this , most of the answers were : “it is not important as long as he sings good”. He is singing, therefore his role is more ‘spiritual’ than the technical accuracy role required by the *bataleros*. He also doesn’t come in contact with the sacred *batá* drums. In fact, some of the *akpwon* I met were gay (although discreet), and there are rumours about the most famous *akpwon* in Cuba Lázaro Ros being gay.

wavy, round. The two women and two of the men were “into it” dancing exquisitely while one of the men was a bit rigid , less supple , tough-flowing, and "lagging behind." A woman from within the “house” who was standing next to me, noticed me watching the “bad” dancer and whispered in my ear: “*no es bueno este hombre, no es maricón. Los otros – si, pero ello – no*” (He is not good [dancer] , this man. He is not gay. The other--yes, but *he* is not).

“The *homosexuals* are better at getting possessed” says Lázaro, a *babalao*, who has many gays in his “house”, and explains: “In general women and *homosexuales* are suitable for spirit possession. They are more open to it and can better accept the spirit. They are more connected to the spiritual than *hombres-hombres* [“real men”] who are more rational in general” (PersCom 2005). This view corresponds with cross-cultural gender conceptualisation of women being associated with the spiritual, supernatural, mysticism and dissociation, while men, with reason and rationality (Caplan 1987: 85-89). The fact that EPH and transgenders are, in spite of being biologically male, endowed with feminine characteristics, makes them, according to the *babalaos* and *santeros* I spoke with, compatible for the spiritual and supernatural aspects of *santería* workshop.

In addition to spirit possession, the ceremonies are very visual and colourful, and require proper singing, dancing, and sometimes also cooking and decorating skills. In the *rito del cucillo* described above, the massive cake with elaborated pink decorations was prepared in honour of the *orishas* by three overtly-effeminate EPH, members of the house. Lourdes, my main *santera*-informant, commented with satisfaction when the cake was brought in: “only *maricones* can make such a beautiful cake” (PersCom 2000). Peter Fry who researched *candomblé* mentions that in the general public's perception, *bichas*²⁰⁶ are more artistic than men and women, and are therefore better equipped to organise and participate in rituals (1995:207). The perception is the same in *santería*: “In the ritual, the presentation and the dances are very important, for us and for the spirits. It has to be beautiful to please the spirits. The *maricones* do it better. They are even better than us [women] at fixing the decorations, dressing up and the dances” (PersCom Lourdes 2000).

²⁰⁶ A colloquial Brazilian term for a loud feminine gay man, equivalent to Cuban *loca*.

“Mi nueva familia” :alternative kinship in santería

If I weren't involved in *santería*, I would be a lonely and unhappy *maricón* with no family, no children, no one to take care of, and no one to take care of me. But in *santería* I have my own “children,” and will soon have “grandchildren” when “my son” becomes *padrino* himself (Luís, gay *santero*, 42, PersCom 2003).

“Alternative family,” a concept already mentioned in the context of the *fiestas de diez pesos* (Chapter 7), is a primary concept of socialisation in historical and contemporary gay lifestyle and is discussed in length in gay and queer theory. D’Emilio writes about the wane of the role of the traditional family as provider of a sense of belonging and support to gays, “[a]lready excluded from families as most of us are,” and the creation of alternative networks of support “that do not depend on the bonds of blood or the license of the state, but that are freely chosen and nurtured” and form an “affectional community” (1993:475). “Queer kinship” and “alternative family” have become major concepts in the development of gay identity. Halberstam defines queer kinship as “a complex relation to reproduction, cultural production, and assimilation” where a “subcultural involvement is staged as an alternative life narrative” (Halberstam 2006:3). “Alternative family” as well as other terms taken from queer studies literature and relating to systems of gay social bonding, such as “double reality,” “alternative kinship,” and “affectional community” are also deeply embedded in the conceptual world of *santería*.

Santería religious and social discourse contains intricate “family” connections between the *santeros* and the *orishas*, and among the devotees, that generate various forms and levels of “alternative” family connections, described by my informants as “*nueva familia*” (new family), or “spiritual family”. For example, practitioners who go through an advance initiation have to move temporarily into the household in which they are going to be initiated and obtain an “alternative family”. Worshippers I spoke with used the term “spiritual family” as part of a spiritual system which imitates real-life connections and events in the *santería* context. This gives the initiated a spiritual alter-ego in the religious sphere, with spiritual life-cycle events such as birth and marriage, spiritual parents, and family members.

In the religion’s discourse, human/*orisha* “filiation” and “marriage” systems exist by which initiates undergo special ceremonies to become “sons” or “daughters” (*hijo*, or *hija*

de santo) of a given *orisha*, and are also “married” to the *orisha*, becoming the spirit’s “bride” (*iyawo*). The system allows different “family” connections to occur simultaneously. Hence, the initiate who is a “son” or “daughter” can also become “bride” of the same *orisha* (Morad 2008:27). This religious system which so drastically contradicts Eurocentric standards of family relations (and may even be considered “deviant”), is not by any means alien to the concept of lineages and extended families in pre-colonial Africa, and in the slaves’ societies of the New World with their “alternative forms of union which were neither obligatory nor stable” (Higman 1975:261).²⁰⁷

The ancient Yoruba rulers are the basis of *santería*’s mythology and the origin of the *orishas*. According to an unwritten ancient constitution known as the “Ebi theory” (Akinjobin 1967:14–17, 81, 177, 204, quoted in Brandon 1997:10), the African monarchy was considered a larger version of the family, where the king was in relation to his subjects as father to children, and there were intricate familial relations between different kings (and therefore between their subjects) based on the belief of belonging to the same great ancestor (Brandon 1997:10). Both this cultural heritage and the situation during slavery explain the intricate and incestuous relations between the *orishas*, as described in the *patakies*, and its reflection in the “family” connections between *orishas* and devotees. Brandon describes this phenomenon as “a double reality,” combining ritual ancestors and blood ancestors (ibid.:136).

This combined system of alternative kinship relations between *orishas* and devotees and between the devotees themselves, allows, according to Dianteill, a “spiritual reproduction system,” whereby *santeros* by way of “marrying” the *orisha*, can have spiritual “children” who later become “parents” and “godparents” themselves (Dianteill, 2000:86). This system actually enables passive homosexual men to “get married” and

²⁰⁷ In pre-colonial African society, “family” meant lineage “including the living, the dead, and the unborn generations” (Brandon 1997:10). There is an ongoing debate between U.S. scholars whether the “alternative family” systems in black society is due to circumstances during slavery, or to a cultural heritage from Africa. In recent years many have come to the conclusion that the truth lies in the combination of the two factors: “Whereas Black families can be analysed as groups with strategies for coping with wider societal forces (Stack 1974), they must also be understood as institutions with historical traditions that set them apart as “alternative” formations that are not identical to (or pathological variants of) family structures found among other groups in America (Aschenbrenner 1978) in Sudarkasa 1998:91).

have "descendants," providing a solution both for the evolution and regeneration of the religion, and for the psychological and social needs of its homosexual devotees (note PersCom quoted at the beginning of this section).

Secrecy, deviance and marginalisation

During numerous conversations with my main *santera*/informant Lourdes, the word “*secreto*” kept re-emerging in different contexts, when I asked her about certain rituals, prayers, and even about the homosexuality of some of her *santero* friends. Secrecy is a central theme throughout this thesis and a common thread between homosexuality and Santería. It applies as a source of power, as well as protection. “One particular sexuality ... was distinctively constituted as secrecy,” wrote Sedgwick about the social context of homosexuality (1991:73). In the case of Havana’s *gay ambiente* this is particularly relevant where the main public gatherings, the *fiestas de diez pesos*, are clandestine parties held in secret places, as described in Chapter 6.

Secrecy is also a main strategy in *santería*, deeply rooted in its history and philosophy. “*Santería* is probably the best-kept secret of Hispanic culture. It is amazing that a religion so widely accepted and practised is so effectively cloaked in secrecy,” wrote González-Wippler (1996:xii). The secrecy of *santería* is commonly explained in connection with the historic need to conceal its practice from the colonial Catholic hegemony. However, it has even older and deeper roots in the religion’s philosophy among the Yoruba in Africa, where

[Secrecy] separated the family of descendants of one *orisha* from those of another and separated the laity from the priesthood. Secrecy assured that the potentially lethal power which the truth was thought to possess would be under responsible care and control, for truth had life-destroying as well as life-enhancing powers (Brandon 1997:156).²⁰⁸

This culturally inherited secrecy continued to be implemented in the New World, becoming the answer to existential needs, and a way to preserve the community and its

²⁰⁸ Not only among the Yoruba, but in many African societies the concept of secrecy is deeply-rooted, an important feature of the religious and social life and a source of empowerment and authority. In 2000, the Mande Studies Association (MANSA) dedicated a whole issue to the subject of “Secrets and Lies in the Mande World” (Mande Studies 2, 2000, guest edited by Molly Roth and Jan Jansen. MANSA).

identity. It was vital for survival and for preserving the slaves' beliefs and heritage, as described by many who researched slave cultures (Stuckey 1987, Rodriguez 2007). Following the abolition of slavery and emancipation, secrecy continued to be an essential component of African-Diasporic worship "The secret makes the sacred in the religions of the *Yorùbá* Atlantic," writes Karin Barber; "it is by being made into a 'secret' (*awo*) that a spirit being gets its authority" (Barber 1981:739–40).

The concept of "secret", as provided both by *santería* and by homosexuality, has an even larger role in Cuban psyche, the role of "cultural intimacy" as Matory observes:

Transnational social movements and diasporas, like nation states, propagate secrets and defend the intimate zones that are created around those secrets. ... Any fact that a community can be persuaded to discuss privately and to silence in company of outsiders can serve the same community-defining function – a function that Herzfeld (1997) calls "cultural intimacy". (Matory 2005:223)

For society at large, secrecy is associated with deviance and marginalisation. The secrecy of homosexuality in various societies is the result of homosexuals being marginalised, outcast and bearers of a "deviant identity" (Plummer 1975:194). In the world of *santería*, this deviant and outcast group managed to find itself a socially accepted and respected space--the divine embraced the deviant.

Santería itself, associated with spirit possession, animal sacrifice, and paganism has been considered deviant in the past, and still is by many who call it "*brujería*" (witchcraft). The deviant nature of possession cults in Africa, such as Swahili *Pepo* and Hausa *Bori*, and the attraction of marginalised groups to these cults, have been researched and documented by many scholars. In his essay "Deviants and Outcasts: Power and Politics in Hausa *Bori* Performances," Okagbue argues that "[m]arginalisation has made *Bori* attractive to groups and individuals in Hausa society who feel themselves similarly marginalised and oppressed for articulating alternative identities and viewpoints to those of the mainstream society" (2008: 270).

The deviant status of effeminate homosexuals in Havana is not just a stigma based on their sexual activity, but is rooted in its historical "criminal connection" as viewed by society, and to circumstances connecting them with the "underworld" of prostitution and crime in pre-revolutionary Cuba (Sierra Madero interview 2006). Ruth Landes mentions a particular group of effeminate and transvestite hustlers and prostitutes in Bahia in the

1940s that has “provided leaders in dominant *candomblé* cults of Bahia” (ibid.). This phenomenon has also occurred in the world of *santería* in the 1940s and 1950s, but was rarely discussed (Sierra Madero interview 2006).²⁰⁹

Peter Fry writes that “[b]oth male homosexuality and possession cults are defined as deviant” and that “[t]o be defined by society as defiling and dangerous is often a positive advantage to those who exercise a profession which deals in magical power” (Fry 1995:194). Mason adds that homosexuals play a role of “subverting the social norms of agency,” a subversion which is essential to *santería* worship (Mason 2002:117,118).

Subversion, danger and power are indeed important concepts in understanding the attraction of stigmatised and discriminated gays to *santería*, and the general public’s perception of this connection between the marginalised and the “deviant” religion. “To have been at the margins is to have been in contact with danger, to have been at a source of power,” writes Mary Douglas (2002[1966]:120).

To better understand the historic migration of marginalised people from the “underworld” into the religion of *santería* – including effeminate homosexual hustlers, criminals, transvestites and transsexuals– it is important to underline one of the main philosophical differences between *santería* and the principal world religions. The essence of the three leading world religions is the polarisation of good and bad, righteous and sinful, god and devil. This allowed its ministers and followers to condemn sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, as “sinful”, “evil”, and “unnatural”. God is asexual, whereas the devil is associated with sexuality. This is not so in *santería*. The essence of *santería* is motion, action, “making things happen”, resonating the philosophy of *resolver* and improvising solutions. This is the power of *aché*, the main energy source of the religion. It is neither good nor bad, but it “makes things happen”. In *santería* both good and bad have place and coexist as legitimate powers; there is no “devil” as such, though some of the *orisha* spirits are mischievous; and sexuality in all its variants takes part in the *santería* cosmos, both in the heavenly sphere of the *orishas*, and the earthly sphere of humans, and even between both spheres, through spirit possession and the

“mounting” process.

Sensuality and homoeroticism in the ritual dances

During the “gay” Changó *toque* I described earlier in this chapter, and many others to follow I heard comments from tourists who were watching about the sensual and homoerotic nature of some of the dances. The few tourists I met in *toques* were brought over by Cuban friends. During the first years of my fieldwork (1995-1999) there were hardly any foreigners present in the ceremonies and *toques* I attended, but since 1999, with the increasing exposure of *santería* in the world media and literature, and the commercialisation of the scene, there were more tourists brought over to watch, especially in *toques*, always accompanied by Cuban friends. In 2003 I conducted a mini survey among twenty-five gay tourists who attended *santería* ceremonies involving dancing and asked them to describe in one sentence their impressions of the dances when performed by male practitioners.. Twenty-one (84%) included in their description one of these terms: sensual, erotic, sexy (mini survey, 2003).

Raúl Cañizares, a gay *babalao* and scholar explains:

Part of the appeal of *santería* is certainly its sensuality. *Santería* is what we can describe as an embodied religion, one that is felt with the entire body, that in turn feeds the soul. The rhythmic patterns of *santería* drumming are said to cause sympathetic reactions in the human body – at least in the bodies of believers--raising from sedation to arousal, depending on the song (1999[1993]:4).

The perception of Afro-Cuban dance as “erotic” in the eyes of the foreign viewer has deep cultural roots, especially in Cuba with its history of sex tourism, night clubs and the stigma of the “dancing *mulata*” (and in our case, *mulato*), embedded in the perceptions of both Cubans and tourists (Fernandez 2010:123).²¹⁰ Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz's 1906 descriptions of the Afro-Cuban ritual dances made from an early twentieth-century Spanish-Catholic moralistic perspective emphasise what he saw as the

²¹⁰ One examples of many Cuban “dancing *mulata* songs” is Chano Pozo “Que mulata,” saying : “*Que sabroso tu bales mulata, y traes una rumba que me mata....*” (“how deliciously you dance *mulata*, and you pull a rumba that kills me”). In a home drag show in old Havana in 1999 I heard a queer version of the song sung by a drag queen, changing “*mulata*” to “*mulato*”.

erotic nature of the dances, and judged as “primitive”, “crude”, and “immoral.” He provides an homoerotic description of the semi-naked male dancers: “It is not uncommon that the sweaty negroes take off their shirts, exposing their shiny busts and their bronzed arms...” (ibid).²¹¹ Ortiz also describes a sexual frenzy which culminates in an orgy at times: “the dancers go crazy with the sexual irritation... the music, the dance , et cetera. and the religious festivity often ends with an orgy” (ibid.).²¹² Ortiz’s over 100-year-old observations regarding the eroticism and sexual tension in *santería* ritual dances reflect the usual racist view of people of African descent as “sensual” and “good dancers” which still prevails among tourists and white Cubans. Pedro, a 46-year-old white gay Cuban admits that he was never a believer in *santería* and views it as “primitive folklore,” but he loves going to *toques* when he is invited by his *santeros* friends, and he tries not to miss any. He admits:

I only go so I can watch the young blacks dance. It is an erotic experience for me. I am an atheist but if I can say anything in favour of *santería* is that it is a much sexier experience than Mass in church. It is nice to know also that many of the guys dancing are gay. I have to admit I met quite a few handsome young men in these ceremonies. I like black [guys]. It is not easy for me to meet young black gays. Those you see in the streets are usually *jineteros*, but in the *toques* I am sometimes lucky... [smiles] (PersCom 2001).

I heard many such stories and impressions from gay Cubans and tourists; however, trying to obtain similar stories from gay *santeros* was a harder task, although a few admitted they have had romantic encounters during ceremonies. Fry claims that in *candomblé*, the *bichas* (loud feminine “queens”) use the performance side of the ritual to impress and “hunt” men (1995:207). When I asked gay *santeros* whether this is true in their case, many laughed in embarrassment, mostly rejected it, but some replied laughingly: “Of course!” Miguelito (30), a gay *iyawó* agreed to share with me his experiences:

When I dance or get into a trance in a *toque* I am not thinking “Hey, I look sexy now,” and I don’t even notice the “audience” or if someone is looking at me. I only concentrate in the process

²¹¹ “No es raro que los negros sudorosos se despojen de la camisa, mostrando sus bustos lustrosos y sus bronceados brazos...” (Ortiz 2001 [1906]:93; My translation).

²¹² “...los baladores se alocan por la irritación sexual...la música, la danza, etc.,y la orgía corona frecueamente la festividad religiosa” (Ortiz 2001[1906]:93; My translation).

of communication with the *orishas*, in *obatalá* [his *orisha*] and the other *orishas*. The experience of being mounted is quite intense and most of the times I don't remember anything after, but you are not in a physical world. The dancing, and movements may look very physical but for the *iyawó* it is different, it is another dimension. ... There are cases in which after the ceremony I have some guy looking at me or coming to me and saying: "I was looking at you dancing. You dance very well." But they don't understand--this is not a dance, it's not like going to a *fiesta* and dancing (PersCom 2000).

Another gay *santero* had an interesting view on the homoeroticism of the dances:

It is part of the ritual, the communication with the *orishas*. We have to be sexy to attract the *orishas*. The dances have to be good, just like the drumming has to be good, otherwise they will not come [down, to possess]. Don't let people say to you this is only religious and not meant to be sexy or erotic. Our religion is connected to sensuality. It is part of the ceremony. It is part of the system (Yendris, 27, PersCom 2003).

The view Yendris expressed was repeated in many conversations I conducted with gay *santería* devotees, as well as non-gay informants. Based on my PersCom conversation with many young *santeros*, the general perception, especially among gay devotees under 40 years old, is that just as femininity and effeminate homosexuality are an essential part of *santería* worship, and are necessary for the process of communication with the *orishas*, so are sensuality and eroticism.

Spirit possession as a (homo)sexual metaphor

Spirit possession, one of the main aspects of *santería* worship and "performance", is "thought of as a 'feminine' predisposition dominated by women and male homosexuals" (Vincent 2006:168). In the beginning of this chapter I described one of many spirit possession moments I witnessed during my fieldwork, where Elio, a *macho* gay *santero*, has been possessed by Yemayá. I described his "performance" as if being sexually penetrated (by a female *orisha*!) which occurred when the possession process started. I referred to the existing literature to find out how researchers have interpreted this phenomenon.

Dianteill defines the process that takes place during the possession as an "alliance" between *orisha* and human.(2000:83). My informants used more explicit definitions with sexual connotations to describe this alliance, comparing the process to a sexual act, in which the *orisha* penetrates the initiate. The terms and concepts used in *santería*

discourse in fact encourage this interpretation. The Yoruba language verb for the possession process is *gùn*, which means “to mount,”²¹³ and the term used for a possession priest is *elégùn* (the mounted one). The Yoruba term *gùn* is also used for a brutal sexual act (male to female or active male to passive male) and for what certain dieties, especially Changó, does to his initiates. (Matory 2003:422).

In my conversations with gay *santeros* and initiates, I have repeatedly been told that EPHs are considered the most suitable males to be mounted by the *orishas*, as the possession process emulates sexual penetration. In any such union between human and *orisha*, irrespective of the original gender of either, the human (male or female) always takes the female role, and the god takes the male one, thus making the possession process a simulation of a sexual act, by which the *orisha* (even if it is a female *orisha*) penetrates the possessed. The essence of the initiation process is that the *orisha* enters the initiate’s body, leaving some of his substance, just like a man leaving semen inside the woman or the passive man. Even those male initiates identifying with masculine *orishas* (78% in Dianteill’s survey) stated that they had been “penetrated” and “inseminated” by the *orishas*, and therefore they take a “feminine” role during the initiation. This “cultural” perception of EPH as “penetrable”/“mountable” and therefore suitable to be “possessed” can also psychologically explain them being trance-inducible. According to Herbert, trance is evoked by “the interaction of mind with specific cultural contexts” (2001:201). In this case one cultural context is related to the worship and the process of *orishas* possessing/mounting humans, and the other is the association of EPH with being physically mounted/penetrated.

An even more controversial (homo)sexual interpretation I encountered was related to the sacred *batá* drumming patterns, as will be discussed in the next section.

²¹³ According to Matory the Cuban-Spanish term *montar* is a better translation of *gùn* than the English verb “to mount”, albeit that they seem to be synonymous, as *montar* contains three layers of reference: sexual penetration, horse-riding, and spirit possession (2003:422)

A controversial queer reading of *Batá* drumming patterns

The role of drumming and percussion in rituals of transition is an almost universal phenomenon. “There is a significant connection between percussion and transition” (Needham 1967:611). Metcalf and Huntington suggest three symbolic meanings to the musical attributes of the drumming, as mentioned by Widdess (Widdess 2006:189, Metcalf and Huntington 1991: 64ff). The first is temporality and temporal division: “A percussive noise seems to punctuate and divide time (“mark time”) the way a line or a wall the way a line or a wall demarcates space” (Metcalf and Huntington 2010:279)., thus symbolises a constant repetitive “transition” from one phase to another. The second is vitality: the rhythm of drumming and percussion symbolises the heartbeat and therefore connotes vitality and “life”/humanity. And, lastly, drumming and power: loud sound symbolises power, and therefore serves in communication with divine powers.

In the context of African heritage, I would add communication and knowledge, both relating to power, to this list. Whereas it is more common to look at the “drum communication” as a conveyor of messages between humans (see about the “talking drums” way of communication in Angus 2000:95,96), in our case it is more about communication between humans and the *orishas*. Pedro, (40), a *batalero* playing in many ceremonies in old Havana told me: “the drums open the sky, so we can reach the *orishas* and communicate with them” (PersCom 1999).²¹⁴

In the *santería* ceremonies and *fiestas de diez pesos* I attended I came across common musical elements and sensibilities to both completely different spheres--the drumming in the *toques*, and the dance music described in Chapters 6 and 7. These findings resonate well with the comparison of dancefloor behavior to ritual behavior as discussed in Chapter 7. However, in this case, the investigation takes an opposite direction, comparing the music in religious ceremonies to gay dance music, and identifying queer elements in it. This, to my knowledge, has not been done before, and in spite of being

²¹⁴ Interestingly, musical instruments whose sound “opens the gates of heaven ” can be found in other religions as well, such as the “shofar” (a ram’s horn), in Judaism, blown ritually in the synagogue during the high holidays.

controversial and, to some believers I spoke with, even “blasphemous,” it sheds light on aesthetic and psychological factors attracting gays to *santería* worship.

In Chapter 7 I mentioned the following musical characteristics in connection with dance music and “gay sensibility”: rhythmic intensity, speed (high bpm), repetitiveness and cyclicity, multiple climaxes, and in some cases I even compared them to *santería* drumming patterns. Indeed, the same characteristics are also typical to the drumming in the *toques* as has been thoroughly described and analysed by Rouget (1985:63-124), Amira and Cornelius (1999) and others.

Furthermore, acceleration of tempo, found in many “gay dance music” tracks (such as Donna Summer’s “I Feel Love”)²¹⁵ is also typical to *santería* music (Rouget 1985:81-82). The drumming is based on cycles which start in a long repetitive and monotonous slow-pace phase in a set tempo (phase I), and then move into an exhilaration phase of *accelerando* and intensification, (phase II) until a climax is reached. The intensification effect is achieved “not only by the acceleration of the tempo, but also by increasing the number and insistence of the drumbeats, making the sound denser”(Rouget 1985:82).

In Appendix X I bring transcriptions of some “phase I” patterns from *toques* to different *orishas* as given to be by famous Matanzas drummer Pello. Appendix III/11 features a lengthy (10 minutes) audio piece of a *toque* to Changó. Note the acceleration of the rhythm and intensification effect caused by the gradually increasing density of the drumming.

There have been many attempts by ethnomusicologists to put these typical musical traits and their symbolic meanings in a cross-cultural context. I will mention some in brief and will then present a “queer” reading which, perhaps controversially, looks at the drumming cycles as a (homo)sexual metaphor.

Cyclicity and intensification in musical forms have been researched from structural, cultural, and psychological angles. While in the past musicologists tended to stick to a structural analysis, contemporary ethnomusicology searches cultural elements leading to these structures. Looking at their cultural symbolism can lead to local-cultural phenomena and to cross-cultural elements, especially when identifying these concepts in

²¹⁵ See Chapter 7. Audio: Appendix III/9

other domains of experience within the researched culture. Widdess, for example, identified it in the *mandala*, a visual Hindu-Buddhist symbol representing the cosmos as a series of circular concentric areas of various geometrical figures, diminishing in size towards the centre, thus graphically combining the concepts of cyclicity, enclosure and intensification (Widdess 2006:204). He further identified it in the geographical layout of Bakhtapur, the town where the stick-dance is performed, and in the route taken by the participants (ibid.).

Another expression of inherited cross- cultural cyclicity in music is reflected in song cycles. Rycenga offers an interesting “queer production” theory in relation to song cycles, which can be implemented in the case of any cyclical music movement, in this case the drumming and chanting in *santería*, and can add another layer of conceptual compatibility of such musical structures to a gay audience.

The song cycle is architectonically amorphous, a feeling rather than a brute formal fact. Reinvented every time one is composed, the song cycle becomes a repository of allusions both internal and external. Unified by mood, song cycles start from and stubbornly retain subjectivity: each cycle has its unique inner logic. To the extent that the song cycle as a form produces other song cycles, it looks like queer self-fashioning rather than heterosexual reproduction” (Rycenga 2006:241-242).

The theoretical frame I suggest for the “queer” elements in the *batá* drumming combines both Rycenga’s conceptual approach of “queer reproduction” and the work on music and trance of Rouget (1985) and others.

According to Rouget, who researched trance and music in different cultures, the acceleration of tempo is “universally used as a means of triggering trance” (1985:81). The trance and spirit possession usually takes places, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, during the third section of the ceremony, the *iban balo*, which also starts with phase I repetitive and slower drumming and moves into an accelerated and freer drumming. As Ortiz describes, the first phase, that of the monotonous repetitive drumming before the *accelerando* starts is not less important than the *accelerando* and intensification of phase II for the trance process. According to *bataleros* I spoke with, the entry into a state of trance actually occurs in most cases during the repetitive/monotonous part of the drumming which Ortiz describes as “an hypnotic tool causing fatigue of attention,” but the possession occurs and manifests itself during the acceleration phase and the dense “climax” section, by which time the *elegún* have already been “mounted” (possessed) by

the *orisha*.

In relation to Phase II of each drumming cycle, when the *accelerando* and intensification take place, Rouget quotes this description by Roger Bastide (1958:20) of the *toque adarum* in *candomblé*: “The ever more rapid rhythm, the ever more imploring tone finally opens up their muscles, their viscera, their heads, to the penetration of the god they have awaited so long (Bastide 1958, quoted in Rouget 1985:81). This physical description, now over fifty years old, was echoed in many of the conversations I had with gay initiates who have been “mounted” by the *orishas*, and who perceived the sexual connotations of the process:

I feel the drumming in all my body, like the most fantastic sexual arousal I ever had. It is just like sex--the first part is the foreplay, getting to know the partner, kissing and touching, slowly, slowly, and then the arousal leading to penetration and orgasm. I know this description may sound blasphemous to some, but ask many of the gay initiates and they will tell you the same... (Fernán, 33, PersCom 2000).

This comparison of the drumming cycles to coitus—an interpretation that was reaffirmed by other initiates and even by *santeros* who did not participate in the possession but described their experience from “hearing the music” and dancing--ties in with the description of the alliance/mounting/penetration process described earlier. Furthermore, many of my informants commented on the repetitiveness of the cycles, and equated them to a multiple orgasmic experience.

An interesting commentary on this pattern of repeating cycles was provided by Carlos (35), a choreographer born into a family of *santeros*:

Those repeating patterns have sensual quality as well. They imitate a sexual act leading to a climax. In fact they imitate a multi-climax sexual act, as after each climax a new cycle starts. I would say it is a bit like a sexual act with many climaxes, or like a promiscuous sexual activity with different men. We homosexuals are known to be promiscuous and sex-driven, or at least this is the society’s perception of our sexual life, and the fantasy of many *maricones*, so, I would say, although this may sound to you controversial, that the sexual connotation of the drumming is more in the minds of the female and the homosexuals than in that of the heterosexual men. This is perhaps one of the reasons that it is mostly women and *maricones* who are affected by the drumming, get into a trance and get possessed (PersCom 2000).

An even more controversial interpretation was offered by gay *santero* Eliades (37):

The *bataleros* are the real *hombres* [men] who play for the *afeminados* who dance and get into the trance. The drumming is like sex, the real virile men are doing the

work, producing cycles of climaxes, and the women and the *afeminados* are “riding on it”, getting aroused and get “mounted”. The music is the process helping the “mounting” by the *orishas* and it takes real men [the *bataleros*] to do it to the “women” (PersCom 2000).

Yemayá and Changó: “protectors of gays”

In the beginning of this chapter I described a spirit possession I had witnessed when Elio, a young virile gay man, identified with the virile *orisha* Changó, was in fact possessed by Yemayá, the *orisha* of the sea-waters, and a symbol of maternity and womanhood (González-Wippler 1996[1989]:57–59), a favourite of gay devotees. This possession symbolises not only the gender ambiguity and cross-gender possibilities of *santería* rituals, but signifies the two sides of “homosexual” imagery, psychology and adoration – the young virile masculine “warrior” on one hand, and the “mother figure”, or, as some informants described, a “fag hag”, a woman who adores and befriends gays on the other (this appropriation is based on a *pataki* I will mention in the next paragraph). In fact, Yemayá and Changó, deities who, drawing from my numerous conversations with gay *santeros*, were the two favourite *orishas* among gay *santería* practitioners during the Special Period, represent in their imaging and performance-style the two “gay” stereotypes--feminine/masculine, active/passive, or in gay discourse “top/bottom”.²¹⁶

Lydia Cabrera quotes her informant Sandoval, who tells her that, according to a certain *pataki* (oral myth), Yemayá “fell in love and lived with one of them” (referring to addodis, homosexuals in the Yoruba language), and, furthermore, went to a country where all the habitants were “faggots, and half-men”, and provide them with protection (Cabrera 1983[1954]:56). Conner quotes a santera who told him that “Yemayá loves gay men as her children ... because she resonates to a certain “tenderness” embodied by gay men” (2004:110). Lázaro, my *babalao* informant confirmed that Yemayá has been an “old time” favourite of gay practitioners. (PersCom 2005),

²¹⁶ Sexually ambiguous Obatalá is also popular among gays, and especially popular among transsexuals. Interestingly, Amira and Cornelius notes that both Obatalá and Changó are immensely popular among *santeros* in New York. (1999:13,14). Is this connected to the fact that NY is a gay-friendly city? It is also important to note that New York *santería* practice. Including the *batá* playing style, grew out of the Havana practice and style (ibid.:15).

However, the latest addition to the “gay pantheon” of *santería* is Changó. Changó is the most masculine and virile *orisha* in the Yoruba pantheon, revered for his good looks (Cañizares 1999:49) and for being a great dancer and seducer. He rules the natural powers of thunder and fire. He is the god of passion, sexuality, power, music, dance, and owner of the batá drums (which paradoxically are not to be played or even touched by homosexuals).

A symbol of masculinity and virility, Changó was traditionally considered “out of bounds to the maricones” (Lázaro, *babalao*, PersCom 2005). Since the early 1990s however, he has become a “gay icon”. He has been appropriated by many gay *santeros* as their hero and protector. The identification is not only in the cosmologic and a visual/iconic levels, but at the performance level as well. Changó masculine thrusting moves and dances, with their *macho* phallic energy (Conner 2004:153,289), once a “heterosexist” domain, are a performative aspect which resonates with the new global gay image and lifestyle culture of gyms and bodybuilding.

I have encountered a strong opposition among some believers and scholars to this gay appropriation of Changó, especially among practitioners over the age of 50. This anti-gay, or to be more precise, anti-EPH attitude associated with Changó-worship prevails especially among those devotees who are also connected to *abakuá* and *palo monte*, and among *bataleros* who believe that, since the sacred *batá* drums belong to Changó, the anti-homosexual taboo on *batá* should also apply to Changó-worship. (Vincent 2006:189). Oyewumi, writing about *orisha* worship in Nigeria, objects to this “gay appropriation” by claiming that “the relationship between Shango²¹⁷ and his congregation is neither gendered nor sexualized” (1997:116).²¹⁸ In spite of these views, after a long period of keeping their distance from the *macho orisha*, gay devotees are nowadays embracing Changó, and even championing him as a “protector of gays” (Tomás Fernández Robaina, PersCom 2003).

Changó dances during ceremonies or folk performances I attended incorporated

²¹⁷ Another spelling used for *Changó*

²¹⁸ Since my investigation is focused on the way Cuban gays interpret and appropriate *santería*’s cosmology and worship, and not on the theological “truth” (which in a purely oral tradition is any way difficult to isolate), I mention the “opposition” to the theory, but I concentrate on the data extracted from my informants that clearly show that Changó became in the 1990s *santería*’s prime “gay icon”.

gestures which can be interpreted as homoerotic and even Camp. Dancers “making” Changó are typically athletic, muscular, and agile, often exhibiting bare chests and torsos. They are dressed in a red costume and wearing a golden crown. The appearance and dance moves were described to me by gay viewers (Cubans and foreigners) as “homoerotic” and “sexy,” but also “theatrical”, “exaggerated”, and “Camp”.²¹⁹

“Changó performance” is manifested not only in the dances, but in *santería* fashion. There has been a trend of visual identification among Changó followers, especially among young gays (age 18–30). This is apparent in the proliferation of Changó amulets, necklaces and wristbands, Changó colours (red and white), and not least the rise in “Changó haircuts” (crew cut). The Changó fad in Cuba is most definitely related to the worship of accentuated masculinity that dominates the gay world globally, and which, via exposure to the United States and the West through the increase in tourism and the growing if still limited access to global media, influences young Cuban homosexuals these days. Changó provides a homegrown role-model, combining modern style and global homoerotic aesthetics with an indigenous Cuban identity.

Perhaps one of the issues that gay Changó fans delighted in and kept emphasising in the course of our conversations was that in the process of syncretism Changó has been paired with a female saint, Santa Barbara. The musicologist María Teresa Linares provides an explanation to this pairing, but ignores the gender issue; Changó was a warrior and so was Saint Barbara. On the iconographic level both are associated with lightning, Changó carries an axe and a sword, and Saint Barbara a sword. In Yoruba mythology, Changó was a Yoruba king and Santa Barbara wears the crown of a queen. Even with such parallels, the pairing of a super-*macho orisha* to a female saint, a “king” with a “queen” may seem paradoxical and even controversial in Eurocentric eyes. According to Pérez y Mena it is not only the cross-gender pairing that appeals to gay devotees, but the different characteristics attributed to both saints: “gays often become devotees of Changó’s supermasculine aspects”, and “on the other hand, they also identify with the martyrdom of the nurturing Santa Barbara” (Pérez y Mena 1998:20).

²¹⁹ See Photos 9.2 & 9.3, and video-cips in Appendix II:24,26,27.

Putting martyrdom aside, the pairing of Changó with Santa Barbara is also a source of many jokes and expressions among Cuban gays. I heard gay Changó initiates, looking very *macho*, with a typical short haircut, Changó tattoos and tight vests showing their muscles, jokingly calling each other "Santa Barbara" or "Barbara", the equivalent of "Muscle Mary" in English gay lingo, indicating a muscular "queen".²²⁰

One of the most popular songs in the gay *fiestas* I attended between 1995-2000 was "Que Viva Changó", sung by Celina Gonzáles, a devout follower of *santería*. The 1995 popular praise song to Changó she wrote together with Reutilio Domínguez, has received a "gay twist" in *fiestas* with the dancers enthusiastically singing the lyrics:

*Santa Bárbara bendita
para ti surge mi lira
Santa Bárbara bendita
para ti surge mi lira
Y con emoción se inspira
ante tu imagen bonita
Que viva changó
Que viva changó
Que viva changó Señores*

Blessed Santa Barbara
for you comes out my lyre
Blessed Santa Barbara
for you comes out my lyre
and with emotion is inspired
before your pretty image
Long live Changó, Long live Changó
Long live Changó, gentlemen... (My translation)²²¹

Yankiel (25), a fiesta-goer whose mother is a *santera* gives his interpretation to the lyrics and to the song's popularity in the gay *fiestas*:

²²⁰ A US blogger named "Alice" has posted a humorous observation, which demonstrates the mistake in trying to compare Changó's characteristics to that of his paired Christian saint: "The behavior of Changó is absurd when applied to St. Barbara: - Changó, in the yoruba legend, is an adulterous male, with two main lovers: Oshum (Virgin of Charity of Cuba), and Oya (Virgin of Candelaria)!... The Christian St. Barbara would be an impossible lesbian, having sex and children with two virgins!... a horrible impossible sacrilege!" <http://www.pscelebrities.com/whitelightblacklight/2006/12/interesting-things-from-news-consumer.htm>. (Posted on December 4th (Changó's saint day) 2006, accessed 10.4.2010).

²²¹ Audio: Appendix III/12

The gays love the fact that the song start with Santa Bárbara, as if claiming 'Changó is a 'queen' [says "queen" in English and laughs]'. Then when the line '*ante tu imagen bonita*' comes ("before your pretty image") it all becomes very gay and people point at each other faces, and then everybody joins in with '*que viva Changó*' (Long live Changó) and really go wild when she [Celina Gonzáles] shouts "*que viva changó señores*" (Long live Changó gentlemen). *Señores*, ah? More likely *señoritas* [laughs]" (PersCom 1999).

The "gay appeal" of Changó has another source in *santería* mythology. One famous *pataki* narrates that Changó once dressed as a woman (Oya) and imitated her walk to avoid being captured by his enemies:

When the sun had gone down, but before the moon had risen, Oya cut off her beautiful hair and pinned it to Changó's head. Changó did not know what to do with woman's hair. It fell across his eyes. It tangled in his ears. Oya had him sit down and wove the hair into two long braids. "Here's a dress," she said. "Put it on quickly, before the moon comes up." Changó managed to tangle himself up in Oya's dress. "Stand still," she said. "Just stand still and let me dress you." ...Finally, Changó was dressed as a passable imitation of Oya. She went to the door and peered out. "Hurry," she said. "There's no one around." Changó stepped outside, imitating Oya's dignified walk. He walked until he reached the forest and came across the line of searching men. He greeted his enemies with an imperious tilt of his head and crossed their line. He did not speak to them because his voice is very deep. It would have given him away. This is the way Changó was able to escape his enemies' trap. (Núñez 1999 [1992]:55; Also mentioned in Cabrera 1975 [1954]:233)

Conner adds another layer of queer interpretation to this story and writes that in the particular "effeminate road" (*camino*) presented in this *pataki* Changó "dresses and behaves as a sensuous woman. This includes putting on rouge and braiding his hair in traditionally feminine style...in this manifestation, he may appear on horseback seated in a woman's position" (2004:70).

This *pataki*, showing the "feminine" side of Changó, has become an "identification myth" for many gay *santeros*. The source of this legend is unclear, but similar to the belief that, in Cuba, Changó also had to disguise himself as a female, Santa Barbara, in order to escape from "the enemy," namely, the Catholic Church. Some gay *santeros* told me a "queer" version of the story, adding that Changó really enjoyed dressing up and walking like a woman, and, moreover, did it really well. Some have even claimed that Changó is really a *macho* homosexual, or a *macho* with homosexual tendencies, which does not clash with him being a womaniser as well (Miguel [30], Pedro [33], Yasniel [25], PersComs 2000).

Identification with Changó is a solution for many Cuban homosexuals who do not want to be seen as *afeminados* and be stigmatised by the society, but still wish to be

noticeable to other homosexuals (a kind of *santería* “gaydar”). Elián (22), a gay Changó initiate, told me: “Women and *maricones* are turned on by the Changó look and the way we dance. Many gays pretend to be Changó but they are not. A real Changó knows exactly what he is – he is a sexy *hijo de puta* who likes to fuck, women or men. In my case, men [*laughs*].” (PersCom2000).

Indeed, in contemporary *santería* discourse, Changó symbolises a certain homoerotic ambiguity inherent to Cuban *machismo*--the power to attract both women and men, and the *carte blanche* to have sex with either--only as a “penetrator,” though, and thus avoid being stigmatised. Furthermore, Changó image resonates well with the new “gay identity” evolving in Special Period Havana, influenced by the global “gay image”, whereas gayness is not automatically associated with femininity anymore, but rather with “super masculinity” and the body-building culture.²²²

Conclusion

The Afro-Cuban religion form *santería* is strongly associated with the two axes on which this thesis revolves- music, and homosexuality. This chapter dealt with different levels of interpretation and appropriation of *santería* ritual performance by gays in Havana during the Special Period, and with strong symbiotic relationship and a synergic system of push- and -pull factors, social, psychological and cultural, attracting gays to the religion.

The chapter started with a brief introduction to the religion and its intricate cosmology of multidimensional deities, the *orishas*, and the gender ambiguity associated with them. It then proceeded to explain the role of music in the religion, and the special role of homosexuals in the practice. This homosexual/*santería* connection has deep cultural roots and a long history, from the *adodi* in the *Yoruba* culture in West Africa, to the fashionable gay *santeros* in contemporary Havana, with their tight white T-shirts and *orisha*-coloured trainers.

Unlike the previous literature on the subject, I particularly defined a sector of EPH (effeminate passive homosexuals) who take part in the religious activities, especially the spirit possession, and, together with women and transgenders are included in the feminine “social sex” category, to which the majority of *santería* practitioners belong

. The space for homosexuals in *santería* is part of a holistic system of philosophy based on a cosmology where the spheres of gods and humans interact in different levels, including symbolic filiation, marriage, and sexual relations. This holistic system also allows a very distinctive form of interaction between the sacred and the secular, along with forms of gender ambiguity and cross-gender activity.

Following the introductory sections, I looked into social and psychological aspects common to both *santería* and Cuban homosexuality, thus creating a symbiotic link, and explaining the space the religion provides for its gay practitioners by providing a supportive alternative kinship system, i.e. family, to solitary homosexuals, and a home to marginal sectors of society, historically associated with deviance and secrecy.

The next sections were dedicated to the three major performance aspects of *santería* and the way they are appropriated to provide a “gay space”. They have been examined via a ‘homocentric’ lens to allow focusing on the thesis’ theme. The ritual dances have been described from the angle of the sensual and homoerotic interpretation given to them, and the spirit possession with its sexual connotation based on the religion’s philosophy and terminology. In both these “performance spheres” EPH practitioners take part as “performers”. Perhaps the most “controversial” interpretation presented was that of the sacred *batá* drumming, the line of communication with the *orishas*, performed by “professional” drummers who cannot be female, not homosexual according to the *batá* taboo. In the context of this thesis, and based on numerous conversations and interpretations offered by my informants, its rhythmic characteristics were compared to those of gay dance music, and its overall effect dominated by cycles of repetitive patterns which develop into parts of *accelerando* and intensification, compared to a sexual multi-orgasmic experience.

The last section was dedicated to the two *orishas* most favoured by gays: Yemayá, a symbol of maternity and womanhood; and the latest addition to the “gay *santería* pantheon”, Changó, a symbol of virile masculinity. Both *orishas* are considered

“protectors of gays”, and represent the two polarities of gay imagery. Furthermore, the *pataki* (oral myth) about Changó dressing up as a woman, and its pairing in the process of syncretism with the female saint Santa Barbara, add another level of identification among gay practitioners.

Hopefully this chapter, in the context of this thesis, has managed to open wider the semi-closed door to the understanding of a phenomenon which was long known, but always hushed or disregarded, a phenomenon which only started “coming out of the closet” during the 1990s. As such, with its rare blend of religion, music, Afro-Cuban mythology, and “gay appeal”, it constitutes perhaps the most unusual and unique space for gay identity in Special Period Havana.

Travelling across the panorama of musical “gay spaces” in Havana’s *ambiente* during the special period, we proceeded from designated spaces, “exclusively gay” such as the *fiestas de diez* and drag shows, to “spaces within spaces”, where interpretation and appropriation create a “queer space” within a non-designated space, the performances of the Ballet Nacional, and *santería* ceremonies. We also moved from the more obvious dance music scene with its strong global connection to gay identity, to “performance spheres”, where performance, performativity and (integral) audience are crucial to the creation of the “space”. The last space in this panorama to be featured in this thesis, unlike the others, is rather a virtual one, with hardly any geographical/physical significance—an emotional *space*.

Photo 9.1 *Batá* drums set.

Source: http://www.folkcuba.com/lucumi/lucumi_image_a/LuNbata2W.jpg



Photos 9.2, 9.3 Changó icons/images. Note the homoerotic and even “Camp” undertones.



Left. Source: <http://omoshango.blogspot.co.il/2011/01/changoshango-santa-barbara-marte.html>

Right. Source: <https://www.wisdomproducts.com/product/7975>

Photo 9.4 (*left*) *bembé* in old Havana, 1999

Photo 9.5 (*right*) Improvised music instruments. *Santería* devotee using a beer can as a percussion instrument in a *toque* in central Havana, 2003



Photo 9.6 *Adés* in *Candomblé* during a precession to Yemanjá, Rio de Janeiro 2004



Photos from *il rito del cucillo* ceremony, Regla, Havana. All photos: Moshe Morad 2000

Photo 9.7 (left) “Gaydar”, a gay devotee making eye contact during an animal slaughter ceremony.

Photo 9.8 (right) A gruesome ritual job carried by a *gay santero*.



Photo 9.9 The cake that “only *maricones* can make” on Lourdes bed, with the sacrificed animals’ bones and entrails underneath.



Main *santería* informants

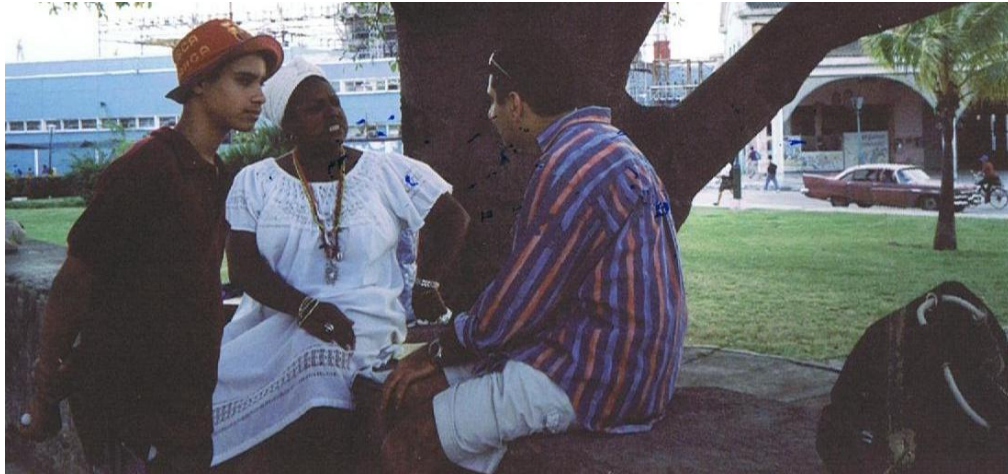


Photo 9.10 Author with Lourdes, *santera* and main *santería* informant and a young *santería* initiate in Regla, Havana 1999. [Photo taken and used with permission].



Photo 9.11 (left) Author with Miguelito, a young gay *santero* and initiate (age 28). Note the different *orisha* necklaces. Havana 2000. [Photo used with permission].

Photo 9.12 (right) “*Santería* fashion” and the commercialisation of *santería*: a female initiate (*iyawó*) wearing a Puma gold earring with the traditional white costume and the *orishas* necklaces. [Photo: Moshe Morad, Old Havana 2003]

Chapter 10

¡Yo soy el bolero!: Queer appropriation and identification in the kitchen

...if any love song taps the vein of sentimentality, bolero cuts that vein with a razor blade (Quiroga 2000:154).

Introduction

Perhaps the most intimate and powerful emotional musical space (intimate, even when experienced in a group) is created by listening to, miming, and identifying with bolero. Bolero is the first style of Cuban vocal music to gain international recognition, and furthermore the first globally known genre which fuses African and Hispanic elements (Orovio 2004:30). Originally a Cuban lyrical form created in the late 19th century, bolero since the 1920s has been evolved by pianists and composers into a romantic/dramatic style emphasising the lyrical content and the vocal performance. (Acosta 1998, Ruiz 1998, Pedelty 1999, Orovio 2004:30, Sublette 2004:388-389 & 484-485). The genre and the centre of bolero activity and creativity has migrated to other Latin American countries such as Mexico and Puerto Rico since the 1930s, but maintained a strong Cuban identity (ibid.). Orovio claims that the various influences it acquired along the way, such as the addition of percussive instruments from the *son* tradition, only “confirm that the development of this style of bolero is purely Cuban and not affected by other countries, as some suggest” (2004:30). Bolero is indeed another Cuban genre presented here that oscillates between local/Cuban and international/global, maintaining its strong Cuban identity manifested primarily by its rhythmic character, described by Orovio as “the sensual rhythm of Cuban bolero as the percussion alters the accents and timing (2004:30; based on Ruiz 1998). This strong Cuban identity is an important aspect of the appropriation of bolero by those trying to maintain or recreate a

nostalgic pre-revolutionary identity, one of the main pillars in gay identity formations in Cuba, as will be discussed in this chapter.

Appropriation is the main theme of this chapter. In fact, bolero's history is a saga of migration and appropriation. Spanish bolero, and most probably the origin of the use of the term is a late eighteenth-century, moderately slow 3/4 meter dance performed to vocal music. This was also the inspiration for Maurice Ravel's Bolero.²²³ The Spanish term was appropriated in Cuba to describe a sentimental vocal genre that was born in the nineteenth century in Santiago de Cuba as part of the *trova* tradition, and was followed by a 2/4-meter dance tradition which accompanied it, but gradually faded away and left the bolero in Cuba mainly enjoyed as a vocal tradition (Orovio 2004:30). In the United States the term was later appropriated again and used as a ballroom dancing 4/4-meter dance-style combining patterns of ballroom rumba with techniques of waltz and foxtrot.

In Cuba, *Trova* singer José Pepe Sánchez is considered to be the "father of bolero" (Orovio 2004:195), and a pioneer in defining its different stylistic characters (ibid.:30). His 1885 composition "Tristezas" ("Sadnesses") is one of the first bolero songs, and its title encapsulates the emotional context of the genre, sadness being its main theme and *raison d'être*. Cuban bolero arrived to Havana in the 1920s where it was developed further by skilled composers and pianists, and soon migrated to Mexico and Puerto Rico. There, it was strongly embraced by local composers such as Agustín Lara in Mexico, and Rafael Hernández in Puerto Rico, who continued to evolve and develop it "always maintaining its identity" (ibid.), expanding its repertoire and adding an extra "international" dimension to the genre. By adding a twist of dramatisation, romanticism, and what some call "kitsch",²²⁴ influenced by the local tradition of *mariachi* serenading, "the Mexicans brought a different sensibility to the bolero" (Sublette 2004:484). The genre was yet to acquire another layer of non-Caribbean melancholy and romance before it would reach international fame as the ultimate, tear-jerking genre of all times. Certain famous bolero standards, such as "Bésame mucho" and "Perfidia," were actually written by Mexican composers. From Mexico, the genre spread all across Latin America, making

²²³ Originally composed as a ballet, but mostly known as an orchestral piece, which premiered in 1928 (before the golden age of Cuban bolero), and became his most famous composition.

²²⁴ See Leonardo Acosta's essay "El bolero y el kitsch", 1998)

its return to Cuba in its revised, “Mexican” form, and thus became, according to Ed Morales, “the most popular lyric tradition in Latin America” (Morales 2003:120), and “could barely be tied to a national origin any more” (Wade 2001:860).

According to Raúl Fernandez, a dedicated bolero fan, expert, and collector (PersCom 2006), as early as the 1940s, bolero commanded a special place in the hearts and psyche of homosexuals in Cuba. This historic relationship between bolero and homosexuals provided the background in which bolero re-emerged as an important emotional musical *space* for gay identity, given the conditions of gay life during the Special Period. This chapter follows this evolution and deconstructs bolero so as to isolate and identify the particular elements that gays identify with, some going so far as to declare: “I am bolero, my life is bolero,” a claim I heard several times in the course of my research.²²⁵

Most of the gays over-forty years old that I met during my fieldwork have mentioned bolero as one of their favourite musical genres, saying that they listen to it mostly at home. The economic situation prevents Cubans from entering the expensive clubs featuring bolero singers, and furthermore many of these clubs deny admission to males unaccompanied by females, supposedly as an attempt to reduce *jineterismo* activity inside the club. I have experienced three unsuccessful attempts to enter into bolero clubs such as Pico Blanco and El Gato Tuerto in Havana with a group of males only. The reason that was given in all three occasions was the policy of not admitting men or women alone, only mixed couples. The physical space which once bolero offered to Havana’s gays (nightclubs and cabarets), has changed--from the public to the semi-private and completely private, turning bolero into a non-physical, albeit very substantial, emotional *space*.

The existing literature on the queer elements of bolero concentrates on Latino gays in general, mostly in the United States (Zavala 1990; Aparicio 1998; Quiroga 2000; Knights 2001). I focus on the specific time, location and unique circumstances in Special

²²⁵ Personification of musical genres is quite common among Cuban performers and writers, for example Celina Gonzáles “Yo soy el punto cubano” (“I am the Punto Cubano,” a traditional rural genre of singing) and Los Van Van’s “Soy todo” (“I am everything,” about Afro-Cuban religion and culture), but in bolero the personification is even stronger and involves not only the performers, but the listeners who identify themselves with the genre, its heroes, and what it represents.

Period Havana, and show how bolero has made a come-back and provided an important emotional *space* for Havana's gays during this very special period. Quiroga's chapter on bolero in his *Tropics of desire – interventions from queer Latino America* (2000:145–168) is an important source. However, unlike Quiroga's coverage of bolero in the gay Latino context, with its focal point and main location in the night-club, my focus will be on the unique situation in Havana's gay *ambiente* during the Special Period, in which bolero is experienced mostly in privacy at home, or in improvised, clandestine *soirées* (bolero *fiestas*) and drag shows.

Many of the songs I heard in my first bolero *fiesta* in 1995 were also the ones I heard throughout twelve years of repeated visits in bolero *fiestas* and at the homes of my informants who labeled them as their favourites and the ones they most identify with. Unlike the dance musical genres described in the previous chapters, in the case of bolero the “musical taste” remained stable and enduring without any change throughout the course of my fieldwork spanning over twelve years. Taking that nostalgia is one of the themes embedded in both bolero and gay discourses, this adoration and preservation of the “oldies” is not at all surprising.

Another reason for the fact that bolero songs favoured by Cubans remained the same during the twelve years of my research period is the stagnancy in bolero music creation and production. There were very few young singers recording bolero in Cuba during that period, and even those who did were mostly performing old classic boleros. It is one style that still did not have a “neo-“ kind of revival in the Latin music world (such as “Nuevo Tango” in Argentina, “Nuevo Flamenco” in Spain, “Novo Fado” in Portugal), and is still strongly associated with the old-time singers and the classic repertoire. Bolero's type of “revival” is a nostalgic one, rather than innovative, a “revival” of the old songs and the old performers. Outside Cuba and the Latin music world, this happened around the Buena Vista Social Club project (album in 1997 and film in 1999), and albums following the BVSC project released by World Circuit and other labels, including solo bolero albums by Omara Portuondo and Ibrahim Ferrer's (2006) posthumous album “Mi sueño”(My Dream). Inside Cuba, the cultural authorities' attempt to revive the genre via the “Boleros del oro” (Golden Boleros) annual festival since 1987 is mostly dedicated to the preservation of old-time bolero, rather than reviving the tradition, encouraging

innovation and fusing it with new blood. Hence, unlike the other genres featured in this thesis, bolero is old, remains old, and, rather than evolving, it thrives on its “stagnancy” as some musicians have put it to me, (or “respectable aging” as others did), and is being cherished by its fans “like wine--the older the better” (Aurelio, 44, PersCom 2000).

One frequent observation made about bolero in many of my interviews, especially with North American and European gays, was that it is Camp. What makes Bolero Camp is its melodramatic music, the overemotional lyrics, and not least its theatrical, “over the top” performance, such as the tears and quivering lips of Olga Guillot and the wild groans of La Lupe.²²⁶ Unlike drag artistes (see Chapter 8) most bolero writers and composers, as well as most performers, do not intend to be Camp. They mean to be expressive, and dramatic, but not Camp. They become Camp from the point of view of the audience's “gay sensibility”. As Susan Sontag puts it, “[t]he pure examples of Camp are unintentional; they are dead serious... Camp which knows itself to be Camp (‘Camping’) is usually less satisfying” (1964).

“Bolero mode”: description of a bolero *fiesta*

In 1995 I was invited to a bolero *fiesta* at the home of Raúl (47) and Alejo (35), a gay couple I had met on one of my strolls down the streets of old Havana. They live in a rundown but rather large apartment on the fifth floor of a decaying colonial building. I was taken to a large, dark room which was lit by candles as there was a powercut in the neighbourhood (a very common occurrence in Havana during those years). Twenty men, some in their twenties and some over fifty perhaps, were drinking beer and cheap rum, smoking, and talking.

About forty minutes later, the lights came on, an old portable cassette-player was quickly plugged in, and the event began with some boleros by singer Olga Guillot. The loud chatting stopped instantly and everyone switched into a “bolero mode” with facial expressions changing, looking emotionally tense and in some cases even distraught. People began miming and singing, each one staring up at an imaginary point (heads

²²⁶ Both singers will be featured later in the chapter.

uplifted at 120° angle), making gestures with their hands and faces, dramatically expressing pain, anger, or passion, and sometimes all three simultaneously.

The impression was one of a temple during a ritual, and some of the audience looked as if they were in a state of trance. Soon three guys in drag (dresses, high-heel shoes, make-up, and wigs) joined the gathering, emerging from the bedroom, where they had been getting ready, each one miming to a song in turn. Only some of those present remained merely watching, while the majority joined in the singing and miming together with the drag artistes.

This ritual of changing cassettes, singing, miming, mimicking “diva” gestures, and staring skywards continued for a couple of hours. However, unlike people in a state of trance who are completely absorbed in their activity, the party-goers here serenely switched in and out of the “bolero mode.” When they were not joining in with the performers, they simply sat at a corner, drinking and chatting together, occasionally laughing at the performers’ antics or clapping wildly at a particularly impressive rendition. Couples could be seen kissing and cuddling freely, evidently emboldened by the romantic music and the intoxicating atmosphere.

Although many of the songs were clearly sung in the second person, to a lover, man, woman, some object of passion or betrayal, or the like, the performers rarely aimed their song at anyone in particular in the gathering, but rather at that same blank point above their heads towards the ceiling, as if at some invisible entity, a pose that made the entire event look even more surreal, at times even ritual and religious. “Boleros are sung to no one in particular,” observes Quiroga (2000:155), “or to someone always outside: they are voiced to a subject beyond the public, so that he or she can take stock of the afflictions of the present and offer redemption.” This kind of performance style is modeled on the performance of singer/diva Olga Guillot, one of the favorite performers of gay Bolero fans in Cuba and one of the most impersonated figures by Cuban drag queens.²²⁷ The repertoire played that evening consisted of classic Cuban and Mexican boleros, by such *boleristas* as Benny Moré, Elena Burke, Orlando Vallejo, Níco Membiela, Orlando Contreras, Roberto Faz, René Cabel, Fernando Albuerne, Olga Guillot, Chavela Vargas,

²²⁷ See video in Appendix II/29

Omara Portuondo, Daniel Santos, Blanca Rosa Gil and La Lupe. Later in the evening the hosts played some rare old recordings of bolero pioneers, such as Roberto Sánchez, Lino Borges, and Fernando Álvarez.

The richness, drama, and “glamour” of the music, usually associated with plush 1950s nightclubs, stood in defiant contradiction to the sparseness of the apartment, with its bare walls and broken furniture. The party at Raúl and Alejo’s was not a one time event. I have since attended many such “gay bolero *fiestas*” in Havana.

Mapping bolero consumption: Demography, geography, psychology

Profiling the “bolero target group” within the gay *ambiente* can be tricky. Most common factors seem to be psychological and identity-driven, rather than social. From over 200 Cuban gays in Havana with whom I have had different levels of conversations, I compiled the following average profile of the bolero gay sub-group: those who consume bolero, enjoy it, and identify with it. They are over forty years old, come from different backgrounds (original *habaneros* or “migrants” from the provinces), are of mixed racial combinations (white, *mulato*, black). In this group, there is a high percentage of effeminate homosexuals, those admitting to be “passive” in their sexual tendency, a high number of *locas* (“raving queens”); a high degree of transvestites, transsexuals, and those who perform or enjoy drag shows.

Raúl Santos, a gay Mexican bolero fan and collector frequently visiting Cuba, claims that in Mexico and Puerto Rico “bolero fans today are more educated, ‘middle class,’ and white” (PersCom 2003). My experience in Cuba was different. I attended bolero *fiestas* and met aficionados in black poor neighborhoods, as well as among a university-educated, “sophisticated” crowd.

In spite of the European image of the genre, bolero lovers come equally from all sections of Cuban society.²²⁸ From within the sub-group of gay bolero aficionados identified among my network of informants, I chose two as my main bolero informants, both for being “typical,” addicted bolero lovers, “well connected” and known in the gay *ambiente*, and ready to meet repeatedly and talk or, as they have put it “open their hearts”, Angelito and Aurelio.

The geographical place of the bolero experience in the gay *ambiente*, is mainly a private space, usually individual rather than social. With the unavailability of bolero nightclubs for local gays, bolero soirees and drag show using bolero songs are perhaps the main social outlet and space dedicated to bolero. However most of the action takes place in a very private domain—at home, listening to bolero cassettes or CDs alone or with friends, feeling empowered and transformed by the music, and creating via the music, a much needed emotional *space*.

My first experience with this private kind of bolero experience was in 1997. Angelito was a forty-five-year-old *loca*, as he calls himself, who swings erratically from loud laughter to tears, from joy to sudden melancholy. He lives in a central Havana flat with his elderly mother and some young “friends” who sometimes stay overnight. He rents rooms to gay tourists. He transforms from behaving *macho* in front of policemen and officials frequently visiting and inspecting the notorious flat, to becoming a flagrant *loca* when entertaining his guests. But when he puts on his favourite bolero cassettes while doing the dishes, he turns into his real self (so he claims), expressing his true feelings and persona. His favourites are La Lupe, Olga Guillot, and Elena Burke. As soon as he turns on the cassette-player and the music starts, he enters into “bolero mode”-- his movements and body language change, his eyes become blurred, distant and transfixed upon a blank point in the wall. He sings the lyrics loudly and expressively and wipes off a tear with his sleeve. Here with his bolero, in the midst of the chaos of a busy central

²²⁸ In Cuba education is free for all, and Cuban society is supposed to be egalitarian. In the course of my fieldwork, there was a gradual move towards a more obvious social polarisation between educated (university, well-read) and non-educated(basic education, mostly from rural/provincial background, or from poor, mostly black, Havana neighborhoods); and between some kind of a “middle class” mostly white (those with access to CUC, working in the tourist industry or trading with foreign companies, or with supporting families abroad, communist party officials, close to the regime and its various institutions, and, controversially, *jineteras/os* with tourist supporters), and a “lower class” (black, living in poor neighborhoods, mostly black, “not connected” or with no relatives abroad). These social distinctions exist also within the gay community in Havana.

Havana flat packed with friends, family, clients, hustlers, and the occasional inspector coming in and out, Angelito finally enters his own private space, an inner, emotional *space* conjured up by the melancholic sounds of bolero. He calls it “kitchen bolero,” and sees it as his personal brand of therapy (PersCom 1997). I have adopted the term “kitchen bolero” to describe this particular musical space—the bolero listened to, mimed, and sung by individuals at the privacy of their homes, transferring them to a world of deep emotion and fantasy.

Indeed, the performance of bolero in the context of this investigation is mostly experienced on cassettes or CDs, or a miming performance to a recorded soundtrack. A recorded piece has its own performative and semantic power and meaning. "At once futurist and nostalgic, sound recording [shifts] the felt nature of memory, time, and place, disrupting the naturalized chronotope of live performance and producing an epistemological divide between face-to-face and mediated communication..." (Samuels 2010:332). Furthermore, even when listening to bolero in public, the experience is mostly psychological and internalised, even meditative, between the listener and himself, or between the listener and an imagined sphere. I was told by informants that “bolero can be felt,” “can be heard inside,” a mood rather than a musical genre.

When asking gay bolero-lovers to describe bolero and list different ideas, conditions and characteristics they associate within bolero, nearly everyone mentioned “desire”. Some mentioned the “power” of bolero: “it is powerful” (*poderoso*), “it gives me power.” Leppert sees “desire” and “power” as the main discursive particularities in any “sonoric soundscape:” “The category ‘desire’ provides me with an entry into the *embodied* relations between the private and public” (1998:294,295). In bolero, desire is essential, both semantically (lyrics) and emotionally. Bolero is indeed a space which embodies relations between the private and the public, as I will show in this chapter.

Other themes/characteristic of bolero that repeatedly emerged in my conversations with gay bolero fans were sexual ambiguity, Camp, melancholia, nostalgia, hysteria, deception, betrayal, and living “in between” or “on the border.” Not surprisingly, these same traits were also mentioned when the conversation switched from bolero to their own life experiences, hence the strong identification with bolero.

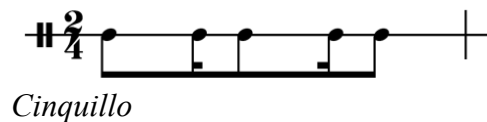
This chapter dissects bolero and isolates themes, ideas, and characteristics that are

expressed in the genre's music, lyrics, performance, and public image; and shows how they correspond to the emotional world of many gays in Havana during the Special Period. I will also examine real-life psychological and aesthetic themes that are common to Cuban gay discourse and to bolero. The chapter starts by showing how bolero poetry allows gender ambiguity and a queer interpretation. It then presents the main subjects of the lyrics with which gay fans identify. The chapter continues into an analysis of the behavior and the psychology associated with bolero making it not only a favourable genre, but a source of complete identification and a state of mind.

Musical characteristics of bolero

Musically, bolero is characterised by a rhythm which makes use of the *cinquillo*, a 5-note syncopated rhythmic cell originating in Haiti (Sublette 2004:253), also typical to *danzón*, a dance genre derived from the Cuban creole tradition which was particularly popular in the late 19th century (Orovio 2004:64).

Fig.10.1



Similar to the *danzón* in bolero the *cinquillo* is followed by a bar of 4 non-syncopated notes. The syncopated bar is considered the “strong” side of the rhythm, whereas the non-syncopated square bar is the “weak” (Orovio 2004:53). This rhythmic pattern is typical to many Cuban music genres, and to the *clave* (see Fig. 6.2). It creates a tension between syncopated and non-syncopated sections, a recurring feature and the rhythmic driving force of Cuban music. An extended use of this musical duality/hybridity has been pointed out and analysed in relation to *reggaetón* in the previous chapter.

These alternating patterns can be found in the melody as well as in the accompaniment of bolero songs. The musical-percussive accent of the *cinquillo* was originally imposed on the text in 2/4 meter, creating accentuation in the text typical to

bolero, magnifying its emotional and dramatic content. Later, with the genre being embraced and developed by pianists and skilled composers the *cinquillo* was moved from the vocal part to the accompaniment, creating melodic/harmonic decorative patterns (Orovio 2004:30).

The following example of Bolero sheet music for piano dates back to 1939. This demonstrates (in both hands) the extensive use of the described pattern: a *cinquillo* bar followed by a “square rhythm” bar (4 eighths). The song is “La tarde” (The Evening) by Cuban composer Sindo Garay, a song I heard on many occasions from the collections of my gay bolero informants. The typically melodramatic “painful desperate love” lyrics are a main feature of bolero and perhaps the main point of attraction to the gay audience as will be demonstrated in this chapter. An example follows:

*La luz que en tus ojos arde
si los abres amanece,
cuando los cierras parece
que va muriendo la tarde.*

*Las penas que a mí me matan
son tantas que se atropellan
y como de acabarme tratan,
se agolpan unas a otras
y por eso no me matan.*

The light in your eyes burns
If you open them, dawn arrives
When you close them it looks like
The evening is dying.

The pains that almost kill me
Are so many, that they crash upon each other
And as they try to finish me
They clash in the congestion
And this is why they do not kill me²²⁹

²²⁹ From: “La tarde”. Lyrics: Sindo Garay. My translation.

Fig.10.2 ²³⁰



Bolero melodies are protracted, lyrical, and flowing. The duality, co-existence, and hidden tension between the syncopated staccato-like “African” rhythm patterns and the long, flowing “European” melodies create the dialectic, the drama, the “dark side” of Latin bolero. This endows bolero with its unique character and feel, a factor that differentiates it from other European sentimental ballad styles.²³¹

²³⁰ From *Música popular cubana* by Emilio Grenet. This rare edition, printed in 1939, was given to me as a gift by Angelito (1997). I promised him to have at least one page from it included in my thesis.

²³¹ I have put the words African and European in this sentence in quote marks, as they express the popular view about the general simplistic binary paradigm of Cuban music: African = rhythm; Europe = melody, which has long since been debunked by many authors, including Manuel and Sublette. It serves here the purpose of understanding the “common attitude” towards bolero musicality and its special appeal to a gay audience, rather than an in-depth musical analysis.

Here are two examples from two of the most favoured boleros by gay bolero fans:

Fig. 10.3

Olga Guillot's song "La mentira" (The Lie)



Note the switch from short staccato-like sixteenth notes (semiquavers) and breaks to flowing long endings--quarter and eighth notes tied by legatos, equivalent to dotted quarters. In bar 4 extended by another eighth beat.

Fig. 10.4

La Lupe's song: "Puro teatro" (Pure Theatre)



Note the switch from short staccato-like sixteenth notes (semiquavers), breaks and syncopations to "flowing" long endings (tied by legatos, or even long dotted half notes, as in bars 21, 23, 25, 27).

With the migration and “internationalisation” of bolero the rhythmic hegemony of the *cinquillo* diminished and the main musical characteristics became the melodies, lyrics and the vocal performances which became “the focal point for audience identification,” (Knights 2006:83). The advent of recording techniques and the introduction of sensitive condenser microphones, played an important role in this process, producing the “intimate sound” of bolero vocals (ibid.).

The vocal/emotional expression, comprising of the lyrics and the way they are sung, has become the main feature of bolero. “The voice in the bolero may be yearning and seductive, offering promises of eternal love and images of the ideal other to the emotionally involved listener,” making bolero “a discourse privileging unrestrained romanticism or sentimentality, and love in its multiple variations” (Knights 2006:83). Unlike other such discourse, the voice expressing it (its beauty, intimacy, sultriness, drama) is not less important than the content, namely the lyrics. For example, if bolero lyrics appear only in written form/book, or sung by artists “with no voice” or in a style identified with *nueva trova*, they will not have the same bolero effect as when performed by a “big” sultry voice.

Bolero lyrics: “Like a knife stuck in your heart”

I can identify with the lyrics of so many [bolero] songs. I hear a song and I say “this is the story of my life.” The words are painful, as they bring back memories of things that happened to me, but I love hearing them. Hearing and crying. I guess I am a masochist. Some of the lyrics are like a knife stuck in your heart (Aurelio, 44, PersCom 2000).

The main aspect of bolero which evokes identification by its gay fans is its lyrics. I asked 45 gay bolero fans which one of the following five elements makes them mostly relate to and identify with the genre, asking them to classify the relevance from 0 to 5: 1. The rhythm, 2. The melody, 3. The lyrics, 4. The performers’ voice, and 5. The performer’s body language. While nearly all mentioned the five elements as relevant, the one that stood out as by far the most (200 out of 225 = 89%) was the lyrics (mini survey 2000). Nearly all the older (over 40) interviewees I asked to quote bolero lyrics knew

quite a vast repertoire of songs. Bolero poetry is known for its “unrestrained romanticism or sentimentality” (Campos 1991:637), making it the favourite genre of divas and drag queens. The words written by researchers about the lyrics of Bolero are just as dramatic as the lyrics themselves: “Bolero lyrics are defined by the bitter aftertaste of pain that accompanies passion” writes Domínguez (1993:80, quoted in Knights 2001:1). According to Zavala “it speaks the language of desire, of its absence and presence, of illusion and disillusionment (1990, quoted in Knights 2001:1). It expresses the desire for “the unattainable other” (Knights 2001:2), and glorifies it. One might well say that all these themes, especially that of the kind of desire that by definition is impossible to realise, have been plucked straight out of the emotional and social world of older-generation Cuban homosexuals, many of them bolero aficionados.

Despite their being so overtly romantic, in many cases bolero lyrics also express a resistance to love and excessive romanticism. As Knights puts it: “The bolero is a complex and contradictory form, a potentially conservative discourse which simultaneously provides the opportunities for resistance to structures of domination” (2001:11).

Gender ambiguity in bolero lyrics

A very important characteristic of many boleros is their discursive gender/sexual ambiguity (Zavala 1990; Quiroga 2000; Knights 2001, 2006; Aparicio 2003). Bolero lyrics allow—and even celebrate—sexual and gender ambiguity. Most boleros are sung in second person and not addressed to a specific named person (Knights 2006:86). In Spanish (as in English), a conjunct verb is genderless and so is the second person “you” (tú, usted) which can refer to either male or female, so a sentence like “I love you” or “I miss you”, can be addressed by both genders and to both genders (and also from/to transgenders). For example, one of the most famous boleros, and a favourite of Cuban gay bolero aficionados is “Tú me acostumbraste” (“You got me accustomed to”), written by Frank Domínguez. The song was rumoured to have been written to another man (Aucilino 2007). It was recorded by both male bolero stars such as Luis Miguel and Luis Hector, and by female singers including Cuban bolero divas Olga Guillot and Elena

Burke, and Mexican openly-Lesbian singer Chavela Vargas. The lyrics are not only “gender ambiguous,” but are also open to various queer interpretations:

*Tú me acostumbraste
A todas esas cosas
Y tú me enseñaste
Que son maravillosas
Sutil llegaste a mi
Como una tentación
Llenando de ansiedad
Mi corazón.*

*Yo no comprendía
Como se quería
En tu mundo raro
Y por ti aprendí
Por eso me pregunto
Al ver que me olvidaste
Por qué no me enseñaste
Como se vive sin ti?*

You got me accustomed to
all those things
and you taught me
how wonderful they are.
Subtly you came into my life
as a temptation
and filled with anxiety
my heart.

I did not understand
how to love
In your “rare” world
and I learned thanks to you.
This is why I wonder
now that I see you forgot me
why didn’t you teach me
how to live without you?²³²

The above song is sung to an ambiguous “tú” and, as in many bolero songs, the performer is the “weak” one in the relationship (the betrayed, the heartbroken). The song starts with “You got me accustomed to all these things,” which can be interpreted as a coded reference, as in “these things that we don’t talk about.” “Subtly you came into my

²³² From: “Tú me acostumbraste” Lyrics: Frank Domínguez. My translation. Audio (sung by Frank Domínguez) in Appendix III/13

life” can be interpreted as in a secret relationship. “I did not understand how to love in your ‘rare’ world” can easily fit into a homoerotic narrative. That is, ‘I was inexperienced and you taught me the secret of homosexual love’. The expression *raro* was used in old-fashioned gay discourse to indicate “gay” in code. This queer interpretation of the famous song was affirmed and reaffirmed by many gay bolero fans informants, and I have seen many drag queens expressing these “special codes” by exaggerating facial and manual expressions when miming or singing them. For example, Amanda in a private drag *fiesta* extended her lips expression (as if whispering) and then put her finger on her mouth indicating a secret when miming “these things that we don’t talk about”), and when miming “in your ‘rare’ world” pointed at her backside referring to homosexuality signified by anal intercourse (drag show in old Havana, 1999). Apparicio described this phenomenon as the “meanings [that] are produced among lesbian and gay interpretive communities that continue to consume boleros as texts that articulate desire between homoerotic lovers” (1998:138,139), facilitated by the fact that gender is “already destabilized in this particular musical sensibility given the open-gendered nature of the *yo* and the *tú*” (ibid.).

The fact that the genre is characterised by a separation between writers/ composers and performers adds another layer to bolero’s gender ambiguity and flexibility. Bolero is a genre characterised by famous composers on one side (both female and male), and famous performers on the other. Unlike other Cuban genres such as *son*, *nueva trova* or *timba*, it is not a singer-songwriter genre, yet it is still “very personal” in its lyrics and performance style; the performer needs to strongly identify with the lyrics in order to sound “credible”. It was written by either male or female writers/composers and performed by either male or female performers, and contains a strong message of erotic desire, and thus *needs* to be gender-ambiguous in order to allow both males and females to perform it credibly. The next step based on this paradigm, is the “queerisation” of bolero, as whatever can be easily “switched” from male to female or from female to male, can also be “naturally” interpreted from male to male, or from female to female, in most cases without altering the lyrics.

The discursive gender ambiguity of bolero does not mean there is no reference to “woman” or “man” as an object, or femininity and masculinity as a concept. In fact

“woman” and “femininity” are strongly represented in bolero, but in a very special, and sometimes unconventional and controversial way, challenging society’s gender conventions. Aparicio (1998:184) notes that bolero lyrics are “a musical space in which Woman (or the feminine) is constructed mostly as absence--an absence that stimulates the expression and articulation of male desire through the text/song and through the act of singing.” But is it a male desire for “woman” or for the “feminine”? Knights claims that “[t]he conventions of the bolero provide a sanctioned musical space within which men can cathartically express their emotions and sensitivity, traditionally feminine attributes without compromising their masculinity. (2001:2), or as Aurelio states, “[i]t’s the only Cuban genre where it’s OK for men to be drama queens” (PersCom 2000).

At the same time, bolero offers “a sanctioned outlet for women to express sexual desire, passion and anger, traditionally masculine qualities” (Knights 2001:2), “subverting the gendered binary division of masculine activity and feminine passivity” (Knights 2006:85, based on Aparicio1998:130-132). This “free, active woman” concept is expressed in many bolero lyrics who feature a decadent *femme-fatale*, or even a woman as a whore, a concept which is celebrated rather than denigrated (Knights 2001), especially in the gay world which admires strong, diva-esque women (who also are perfect subjects to impersonation by drag queens). The acceptance, and even glorification, of the feminine-sensitive man on one hand, and the masculine super-woman (the “diva”) on the other, belongs to the conceptual universe of bolero and to gay men.

Furthermore, in the cases that words are gendered (such as adjectives or nouns), conjugation is applied to alter the subject from feminine to masculine according to the gender of the singer, which also allows interpretation of male-written boleros by female singer, as well as, in our case, a homoerotic interpretation. Aparicio gives the example of Augustín Lara's “Perdidas” [lost women], who become “Perdidos” [lost men] when performed by female singer Toña La Negra (1998:138). I encountered a similar “sex - change” with the same verb, when in 2003, in a private bolero *fiesta*, I saw a man in drag singing Chucho Navarro's famous bolero “Perdida” while aiming it at a young gay man in the audience who has just ended a ten year-long relationship. The man strongly identified with the song lyrics and was in tears.

*Perdido [originally: Perdida] te llamado la gente
Sin saber que has sufrido por la desesperación*

'Lost' the people called you,
Without knowing that you suffer from despair²³³

Zavala describes this grammatical-sexual orientation phenomenon in these words: "the communitative triangle *emisor/mensaje/receptor* [speaker/message/receptor] is continuously destabilized as to gender infections" (Zavala 1990, Aparicio 1998:138).

The phenomenon of "queerisation" of lyrics and destabilised gender performance can be found in other "emotional song" cultures. In an essay about representation of homosexuality in recordings of German pre-war cabaret songs known as *schalgers*, Anno Mungen (2006:68), talks about the process of "queering the song:"

Although the songs in many cases revealed erotic contexts, gay performers – as the recordings show – usually did not come up with their own lyrics or music but mostly performed 'straight' songs in their own manner, re-creating the existing music and situating it in a new performative context. The recordings of these songs reflect the model of the straight world creating gay identities through artistic expression (ibid.:69)

Another way of queer appropriation is via performance and body language--dance, gestures, drag (Mungen 2006:77). Mungen talks about two levels of appropriated *schlager* performance (also the case in bolero): mediatised (the recording or the stage performance by the singer) and live representation by dancers-listeners (secondary re-creation of the performance, by way of dance, drag shows, and "kitchen bolero"). Both *schlager* and bolero genres are extensively used in drag shows in Germany and Cuba respectively.²³⁴

Central themes in bolero lyrics

Common themes in bolero poetry which are particularly resonant with gays in Cuba include living in danger, suffering from chronic heartbreak, being betrayed and being lied to, living in disguise, living in illusion, and being "prohibited". Here they are with short examples for each one, extracted from songs I have frequently seen "performed"²³⁵ in a "bolero mode" in gay bolero *fiestas* or privately, at home, in "kitchen bolero".

²³³ From: "Perdida".Lyrics: Chucho Navarro. My translation.

²³⁴ See Chapter 8 about performance/performativity in drag shows.

²³⁵ I put the word "performed" in quotation marks as the performance I describe is actually a "performance of a performance," when the "performer" mimes the recorded song played from a sound system and with his/her own gestures and mimics gives the song its meaning. The same applies of course to drag shows (Chapter 8) where most songs are mimed and "recycled".

Danger

*Sabiendo que es mortal ese veneno
Que brindas con tus labios primorosos,
Jugándote la vida en un beso,
Amor travieso, ajeno y peligroso...*

I know that this poison is deadly,
The one you offer with your beautiful lips
Gambling on my life with a kiss
Mischievous, alien and dangerous love...

(From “Amor robado” [Stolen love], by Esteban Taronji. My translation)

“Amor robado” was performed in the bolero *fiesta* I described in the introduction. The “performer” emphasised the words *mortal* (deadly) and *peligroso* (dangerous) by twisting his face with a painful/fatal expression, rolling the ‘R’s exaggeratedly, shaking his head from side to side rapidly, making a fist with the left hand and holding it close to his chest/heart. In the *fiesta* I described above, the “performer” did not direct his stare to an individual but at a blank point in space, in a typical “bolero mode”.. At another bolero *fiesta* as well as at drag shows, I saw the “performer” directing the quoted lyrics at a handsome, young, macho-looking man in the audience, expressing the theme of “danger” gays face when falling in love with young heterosexual men, a “mischievous, alien and dangerous love.”

As Aurelio told me: “we are used to living in danger. It is dangerous to fall in love with a *macho buggarón*. You know you are going to suffer at the end. He will either rob you or bit you up, or break your heart” (PersCom 2000).

Suffering

*Este amor delirante
Que abrasa a mi alma,
Es pasión que atormenta
A mi corazón...*

This delirious love
Which burns my soul
This passion which torments
My heart...

(From “Delirio” [Delirium], by César Portillo de la Luz. My translation)

*No puedo ser feliz,
No te puedo olvidar,
Siento que te perdí...*

I cannot be happy
I cannot forget you
I feel that I lost you...

(From “No puedo ser feliz” [I cannot be happy], by Adolfo Guzmán. My translation)

Both songs, “Delirio” and “No puedo ser feliz,” were regularly “performed” in bolero *fiestas* and privately at homes (“kitchen bolero”), with suffering and the inability to be happy being one of the main themes both in bolero poetics and in numerous conversations I had with older Cuban *locas*. “No puedo ser feliz” is one of homosexual musician Bola de Nieve’s most famous boleros, and a “classic” in the cassette/collection of all gay bolero fans I met in Havana.²³⁶

Betrayal and lying

*Cuidado, con tus mentiras
Que yo las puedo adivinar cuando me miras...*

Beware, with your lies
Which I can clearly detect when you look at me...

(From “¡Cuidado!” [Beware], by Chico Navarro. My translation)

*Por qué te fuiste aquella noche
Por qué te fuiste sin regresar
Y me dejaste aquella noche
El cruel recuerdo de tu traición*

Why did you leave that night
Why did you leave and did not come back
And you left me that night
The cruel memory of your betrayal.

(From “La última noche” [The last night], by Bobby Collazo. My translation)

²³⁶ Video: Appendix II/28

Betrayal is a theme that regularly appeared in the life stories of many of the older (over 40 years old) gays I met in Havana. In some conversations this feeling of chronically being betrayed has expanded above the personal level. Being betrayed by society and by the authorities emerge from stories of neighbours reporting gays to the CDR and police, co-workers reporting them to the “bosses,” teachers whose personal lives were reported to the university authorities by co-teachers and were fired just because of their homosexuality.

Lying is another reoccurring theme in many boleros I heard throughout my fieldwork. Some other examples with “lie” being the main theme and even part of the title: “Mentiras tuyas” (“Your lies”) by Elena Burke; “Eso es mentira” (“This is a lie”) and “Mientes” (“You lie”) by Blanca Rosa Gil; “Miénteme” (“Lie to me”), “La mentira” (“The lie”) and “La mentira se te olvida” (“The lie is being forgotten”) by Olga Guillot.

Interestingly, when it comes to lying, many gays admit not only to being lied to and being victims of lies, a feeling expressed in the lyrics of “¡Cuidado!” quoted above, but also to having to lie themselves, and having to “live in a lie,” “to put a mask on” (a concept which is discussed in the upcoming section about *Bola de Nieve*).

Deceit is a popular theme in bolero poetics. In fact Quiroga claims that “Bolero is all about deceit” (2000:156). It expresses an “erasure” of all that exists, and a desire that is not real, but “a mental construction imposed on the real” (ibid.:152). I heard the same claim from Aurelio: “For us old-generation homosexuals, bolero is about deception, we are deceiving ourselves, closing our eyes and thinking we are on a stage, and dreaming about the perfect man who will love and possess us (PersCom 2000). Angelito, however, interestingly reversed the concept of bolero-as-deception: “I always have to act, to be someone else. This is the only way you can survive here. Sometimes I act so much I forget who I really am. Only when I listen to my [bolero] music I tune into my real self, my inside. I stop pretending to be strong or crazy” (PersCom 2000).

One of the most popular boleros among Cuban gays is La Lupe’s “Puro teatro” (“Pure theatre”), which is all about being deceived:

Teatro...
Lo tuyo es puro teatro
Falsedad bien ensayada

*Estudiado simulacro
Fue tu mejor actuación
Destrozar mi corazón
Y hoy que me lloras de versa
Recuerdo tu simulacro
Perdona que no te crea
Me parece que es teatro*

Theatre...
Yours is pure theatre
Well-rehearsed falsehood
Well -studied simulation
This was your best show –
Destroying my heart.
And today when I truly cry
I remember your show
Sorry but I don't believe you
I think that it is all theatre.

(From "Puro teatro" by Curet Alonso. My translation)

The song is about disguise, lying, and betrayal--a betrayed person addresses his lover, who is pretending to cry, asking for forgiveness: "I don't believe you, you're just acting." During the Special Period, Cuban gays' identification is with both the betrayer (as a way to survive) and the betrayed. This song, one of the *ambiente*'s "anthems", is further discussed in the section on bolero gay icons, about La Lupe.²³⁷

Illusion and disillusion

*Después que uno vive veinte desengaños
Que importa uno más...
Después que conozcas la acción de la vida
No debes llorar
Hay que darse cuenta que todo es mentira
Que nada es verdad.
Hay que vivir el momento feliz
Hay que gozar lo que puedas gozar
Porque sacando la cuenta en total
La vida es un sueño y todo se va.
La realidad es nacer y morir
Por qué llenarnos de tanta ansiedad
Todo no es más que un eterno sufrir
Y el mundo está hecho de infelicidad.*

²³⁷ Not surprisingly "Puro teatro" was used as the music for an anti-Castro video clip I found in YouTube, where Fidel is shown as the deceiver the song is sung to, and his rhetoric being "pure theatre". Video: Appendix II/31.

After having lived twenty disillusiones
What does one more matter?
After knowing the way life goes
There is no need to cry
You have to take into consideration that everything is a lie
That nothing is true
You have to live the happy moment
Enjoy what you can
Because when you add it all up
Life is a dream and nothing lasts forever
Reality is born and then dies away
Why do we stuff ourselves with so much anxiety?
Everything is but an eternal suffering
The world is made of unhappiness.

(From “La vida es un sueño” [Life is a dream] by Arsenio Rodríguez. My translation)

Arsenio Rodríguez who wrote this song is one of Cuba’s most important musical figures, a prolific composer, and a major force in the incorporation of African elements in popular Cuban music and the development of *son montuno* and *mambo* (García 2006). This dark bolero became the most famous of his hundreds of compositions (Sublette 2004:533). It also became one of Cuban gays’ favourite boleros, with its lyrics becoming a major subject of identification. Angelito has the lyrics written in his personal diary to which he always refers (PersCom 1997).

Being prohibited

*Soy ese beso que se da
Sin que se pueda comentar,
Soy ese nombre que jamás
Fuera de aquí pronunciarás,
Soy ese amor que negarás
Para salvar tu dignidad,
Soy lo prohibido.*

I am that kiss that is given
Without being able to tell anyone,
I am this name that you will never
Pronounce outside, out of here.
I am this love which you will always deny
To save your dignity,
I am the prohibited.

(From “Lo Prohibido” [The prohibited], by Roberto Cantoral. My translation)

This song, “Lo prohibido” (“The Prohibited”), resonates strongly with the complex situation of “living in sin” and being a prohibited sexual object for heterosexual men. Cuban gays of the older generation accepted this as their natural norm of existence, living in the fantasy of loving real men and living with them, but having to put up with being abused only for sex or money, prohibited for love. After playing and miming to this song in his kitchen with tears in eyes, Aurelio (age 44) told me:

Yo soy el prohibido [I am the prohibited]! D---, the bastard, for years whenever he wants to fuck a man or to get a blow job knows where to find me, but even when we were closer and meeting nearly every day, he never dared walking near me in the street and would ignore me when he saw me in the street by chance. I asked him once when we were “in love” and he even told me he loves me. “Can we ever become a couple like C--- and R--- [a gay couple living together, neighbours of Aurelio]?” And he said “No way. Never. I will only marry a *real* woman.” And [he] was angry at me for thinking about it. He is now married to this *mulata*, but whenever he wants real good sex he comes here. I am still in love with him, and every time he goes back home I cry” (PersCom 2000).

“Bolero state-of-mind”: common themes in bolero and in gay psychologies

“When I hear it [bolero] all my senses become alert, I get into a special mood, it’s a bolero state of mind” (Juanito 55, PersCom 2000).

This section looks into various psychological themes which kept recurring in the numerous conversations I held with informants both about bolero and “about life” as gays in general. Respondents mentioned the same themes in both contexts, bringing a psychological layer to the connection between bolero and gays, a connection manifested in the phenomenon of “bolero mode” kind of transformation that gay bolero fans go through, as described in the previous pages. The recurring common themes I refer to include: melancholia, nostalgia, hysteria, feeling rejected, being “on the border” or “not here and not there,” and feeling “international”.²³⁸

Melancholia

The most common term my informants (gay and non-gay) used to describe bolero music was “melancholic”. Bolero’s melancholy is evoked both by the music (melody and rhythm) and by the lyrics. Musically, it is expressed by the slow-paced sadness of the

²³⁸ This is not psychological research, and therefore the terms and concepts are used in their colloquial meaning, and the few psychological literature references mentioned are brief and concise.

melody, the minor scale of most bolero compositions, and the destabilisation caused by syncopation of the *cinquillo* as explained earlier in this chapter.

As for the lyrics, as demonstrated above, they compound the genre's intrinsic melancholia in a sense of tragedy and denial. Quiroga distinguishes between the melancholic sadness associated with *samba* and that of bolero:

Samba may invoke the sadness that accompanies the morning after a night of reckless abandon, but boleros insist on remaining in that night, in that space. They do not prepare you for the inevitable disaster: they want and beckon the constant reappearance of disaster. Boleros proclaim denial as a mode of affirmation. (Quiroga 2000:152)

This “melancholy/gay connection” has in the 1990s emerged to the surface, making bolero a signifier of a gay world, where bolero is voiced “via the melancholic homosexual as a polemical figure of mourning and celebration” (ibid.:149). Gay Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar’s films are a good example of how bolero music is used in association with melancholic queer scenes and heroes; for example, Bola de Nieve’s music in “Law of Desire,” and La Lupe’s music in “Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown”. Another example is “El último bolero” (The Last Bolero), a bittersweet Cuban theatre play by Cristina Rebull and Iliana Prieto (sister of Culture Minister Abel Prieto), which tells the story of reunion between a woman who left Cuba with her gay son and her daughter who stayed in Cuba. When asked about the title, the director says that the characters *are* “bolero”: “...*muy melodramático, pero con él te puedes reír, te puedes enamorar...*” (...very melodramatic, but you can laugh with it, and you can fall in love with it...).²³⁹

Another connection to melancholia is related to the prohibition associated with homosexuality, one of the themes featured in the previous section: “[I]n the case of a prohibited homosexual union, it is clear that both the desire and the object require renunciation and so become subject to the internalizing strategies of melancholia”, writes Butler (1999 [1991]:79-80). Gender-identity and the taboo on homosexual desire are other sources of melancholia: “... a kind of melancholia in which the sex of the prohibited object is internalized as a prohibition. This prohibition sanctions and regulates discrete gendered identity and the law of heterosexual desire ... the taboo against homosexuality” (ibid:85-86).

²³⁹ source:

http://www.elpais.com/articulo/cataluna/Muntaner/acoge/ultimo/bolero/obra/critica/sociedad/cubana/elpepiatcat/19990120elPersComPersComat_28/Tes/ (accessed 1.2.2010).

Bolero lyrics often portray strong and even exaggerated self-victimisation, self-blame, and self-criticism, feelings Freud associated with melancholia (ibid. 83). This gender-identity complex, guilt-feelings, and the taboo of homosexual desire that underlie Freudian melancholia, are fundamental ingredients of queer bolero.

(Invented) nostalgia

In a mini survey I conducted among gay bolero fans in 2000, 26 out of the 35 gay bolero fans that I queried (74%) mentioned nostalgia as the main feeling evoked by bolero. However, in most cases, this nostalgia is invented and represents longing for a glamorous period that had never really existed for most of the people who indulge in it.²⁴⁰ According to Mexican writer Carlos Monsiváis, bolero brings “the passion for the memory of passion--in tired postcoital moments, to listen to one’s idol is to go from the loss of innocence to the recapture of candour” (quoted in Quiroga 2000:145).

Invented nostalgia is a “way to cope with life,” according to Aurelio (PersCom 2000). As Sprengler who researched nostalgia in cinema, writes, “[n]ostalgia surfaces in response to uncertainty, anxiety and dissatisfaction with the present” (2009:31). Gays are known to be admirers of nostalgic music styles, nostalgic films, and collectors of nostalgic artefacts, but “nostalgia for a place one has never seen” (Gross 1993:124). So is the case in Cuba. As was mentioned in Chapter 5, in “Strawberry and Chocolate,” the film which represents more than anything else Cuban homosexuality (not only to Cuban gays, but also to non-Cubans and to Cuban heterosexuals), we see Diego, the gay hero, enveloped in nostalgia and thrives on it. His house is full of antique artefacts and memorabilia, and the music he likes and introduces to the young communist student David via his record collection, likewise, reeks with nostalgia.

Nostalgia was coined as a medical condition (Boym 2002: xiii-xiv), however it was “demedicalised” in the mid 20th century, taking its place between culture and psychology, and used for political purposes by “making sense of people’s ongoing fascination with the material, visual and aural culture of times past...in a way that supported its emerging political used” (Sprengler 2009:31). Whereas Sprengler

²⁴⁰ The concept of “invented nostalgia” is not only an individual practice, but also known in its social/cultural context when deliberately used by culture institutions and planners. (Chaney 1997, Boym 2002, Judd and Kantor 2006).

investigate nostalgia in the cinema industry, Kramer looked at invented nostalgia in music: “We hear modes of identity playing out their conflicted history, nostalgia being invented in the service of cultural purity, formal closure seeking both to subsume musical tradition (the long echo, say, of Beethoven’s Fifth and Ninth Symphonies) and to distance itself from social upheaval” (Kramer 1995:198).

Invented nostalgia is also used in much popular music, especially when “authenticity” and the search for the “ethnic” and the “authentic” is involved. “Authenticity hangs on nostalgia” claim Connell and Gibson (2003:272), as “[m]odernity demands its converse, tradition and even invented tradition, which becomes embedded within modernity” (ibid.). The use of invented nostalgia in the service of cultural purity and to combat social upheaval is typical in neo-folklorisation projects of “young” countries, using music, as well as other cultural forms in order to “create” a unifying folklore. “Bolero politics” is a good example. Bolero, once associated with the decadence of the night clubs of pre-revolution Havana, has been appropriated by the cultural authorities as a “national” heritage with a dedicated festival “Boleros de oro” (Golden Boleros) organised by The Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba (UNEAC). The official ‘invented nostalgia’ effort in reviving bolero resonates well with the individual use of invented nostalgia among Cuban gays as “a way to cope with life,” in the creation of a much needed emotional *space*.²⁴¹

Hysteria

“Hysteric” is another psychological term widely used to describe the performances of many bolero artists.²⁴²

Richard Middleton touches upon hysteria in torch-song performances, and draws on

²⁴¹ The concept of “invented nostalgia” when deliberately used by culture institutions and planners is widely discussed in Urban Studies literature (Chaney 1997, Boym 2002, Judd and Kantor 2006).

²⁴² It is important to clarify that I use hysteria here in its colloquial meaning (and not as a medical term), as defined in The Oxford Dictionary of Difficult Words: “exaggerated or uncontrollable emotion or excitement ... a psychological disorder (not now regarded as a single definite condition) whose symptoms include conversion of psychological stress into physical symptoms (somatization), selective amnesia, shallow volatile emotions, and overdramatic or attention-seeking behavior. The term has a controversial history as it was formerly regarded as a disease specific to women” . (Source: <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O999-hysteria.html>. [accessed 4.2.10]).

Lacan and Freud while discussing masculinity and male performance in popular music. This description can be easily adapted to bolero:

... lyrics return obsessively to themes of hopelessness and death. Obsessional Neurosis--the condition towards which classic torch songs points--was considered by Freud to be a "dialect" of hysteria.... The obsessive refuses the question of sexual difference: The obsessional is precisely neither one [sex] nor the other – one may also say that he is both at once (2007:117).

As for the behavioural side, on several occasions I was able to identify "hysterical behaviour" both among the performers (La Lupe, for example, was known for her frenzied performance), and among the audience. In the summer of 2001, I was invited to a private bolero *fiesta* in old Havana; the audience was mostly gay, but there were also some non-gay neighbours present. The amateur bolero singer known as "Carlito" frequently burst into tears, shouts and screams, followed by silent weeping--all classic symptoms of hysteria (unrelated to any evident personal incident, merely to the lyrics and the emotional intensity of the music). Carlito's behaviour was not exceptional, and I was told of many incidents when amateur or professional *boleristas* broke down during a performance. "Of course the singer is 'only performing', but so, too, is the hysteric," writes Middleton (2007:114), and paraphrasing on Freud's "dream-work", he talks about "song-work": "In both cases, what is performed is conflictual – the staging of a lack, of ambivalence, of 'multiple identifications'; paradoxically, it is a 'desire for the unsatisfaction' that is presented to our gaze..." (ibid. 114,115).

As for the audience itself, although "clinical hysteria" is quite rare, I have witnessed many incidents of hysteria-related behavioural patterns, such as uncontrolled tear-shedding, weeping, and melancholic expressions among the audience.

Interestingly, psychoanalysis has strongly connected hysteria with femininity and with gender ambiguity and destabilisation. In the wake of Freudian theories, Lacan claims that hysteria derives from the question "Am I a man or am I a woman" (1993:171)? Furthermore, Freud states that "the root of hysteria lies in a sexual fantasy – but the fantasy stands for a situation in which something has 'gone wrong,' and the 'normal' course of desire has been blocked and refused" (Middleton 2007:114).

Borders and liminality

“Being on the border, not here, not there” is another reoccurring theme in bolero psychology. “Bolero performances deploy and reconstruct borders,” writes Quiroga (2000:155). He explains that “[t]he gash of sentiment is always a question of borders, and it works by turning every point of breakdown into a moment of reconstitution” (ibid.). Other borders to be found, emphasised and exaggerated in the discourse of bolero, are those of me/you and masculine/feminine, “in ways that do not necessarily correspond to the ways gender acts out in the public sphere” (ibid.), women can be defiant or aggressive, and men can be feminine, forlorn, destitute, or apathetic (ibid.:156).

This preoccupation with borders gives bolero its “gay-friendly” quality:

The use of the genre by gay men exposes the very marginalization given within borders staked out by society. Boleros allow gay men to deploy and suspend the borders implicit in the genre, and to remotivate them according to their own wishes and desires. By mimicking the constitution of the borders, by erecting them again and again, gay men reveal that the only possible essentialism lies precisely in the hybrid arbitrariness of the border. By placing themselves on the border, they refuse marginalization (Quiroga 2000:162)

Being constantly “on the border” means acquiring a liminal status, which is not necessarily marginalised or inferior, but rather a mobile, threshold status, “not outside of the social structure or on its edges, it is in the cracks within the social structure itself” (La Shure 2005). Bolero can easily fit Turner’s definition of liminality: “ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification” (1974:232). In a previous description Turner made (1969) he likens liminality to “being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality...” (2002[1969]:359). Darkness, invisibility, death, and sexual ambiguity are topics which are not foreign to bolero’s lexicon.

Bolero “celebrates” its liminality on many levels--lyrics about uncertainty of love, feelings, social status; a threshold musical character which oscillates between European and African, between salons and plush night-clubs and clandestine drag shows and kitchens, between glamour and misery. Liminality is often connected with secrecy, and so is gay bolero, with its furtive, ambiguous connotations. The liminality of bolero poetry and its social status resonates well with the liminality of gay existence in Special Period Havana, where many gays find themselves “ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification” (Turner 1974:232).

Another aspect of the liminality of both bolero and gay life in Havana is their

migratory/Diasporic nature. It is perhaps not a coincidence that most Cuban bolero divas and “gay icons” ended their life in the Diaspora, and were admired “clandestinely” by Cuban gays while officially were strigmatised as “traitors”.

Bolero’s gay icons

In Chapter 6, I showed how the identification with musical heroes which portray a gay image or a gay-friendly image is an important aspect of the queerification of a genre (*reggaetón*, in that case). Here I will discuss this phenomenon in bolero, the only Cuban musical genre in the 20th century which has produced gay icons as such, either by dint of their sexuality, or through their stage persona, behaviour, or personal life-stories.

Although this thesis deals with homosexuality in the context of music consumption rather than music-making, it is important to note that bolero is the only Cuban musical genre that boasts heroes who are knowingly homosexual, such as the two most famous and most respected pianists and composers of Cuban popular music in the first half of the 20th century, and leading figures in the Cuban bolero world. These include Ernesto Lecuona (1895– 1963) who composed nearly 600 pieces, among which were many known boleros and standards of Cuban music (Orovio 2004:122) and Bola de Nieve (1911–1971) who became the most famous homosexual in the history of Cuban music, and whose life-story and public image as both black and homosexual, resonate well with bolero’s queer character, ambivalence, and “masquerade”.

Bola de Nieve (1911-1971): “I am a sociable negro, intellectual, and chic”



Photo 10.1 (left) Source: <http://www.last.fm/music/Bola+De+Nieve/+images/30640935>

Photo 10.2 (RIGHT) Source: <http://www.dcubanos.com/sabiasque/bola-de-nieve-mexico-y-el-cardini> (both accessed 3.2.2011)

Bola de Nieve (“Snowball”) was the derogatory nickname given to Ignacio Villa by the kids in Guanabacoa’s movie-house. Later, this became the stage-name of the dark-skinned, rotund pianist who became one of Cuba’s most innovative and reputable musicians. Villa was born to a family of thirteen children, strongly absorbed in Afro-Cuban religion, like many families in Guanabacoa at the time. His mother was a *santera* and a rumba dancer, and his father a foreman at the docks, a *palero* (practitioner of *Palo Monte*, a form of Afro-Cuban religion), and an *abakuá* (a male-only Afro-Cuban secret society), which are stricter and not tolerant to homosexuals as *santería* is.²⁴³

Villa started his musical career as a pianist at a cinema, accompanying a singer. He owes his rise to fame to famous Cuban singer Rita Montaner (1900-1958), who made him her accompanist. When in 1933 they went on a trip to Mexico, Villa was surprised to discover that the billing for the event read “Rita Montaner and Bola de Nieve,” citing his childhood nickname. From then on, this moniker became his regular stage name (Sublette 2004:387). In the beginning of the 1940s, Villa was better known in Mexico than in Cuba. Later he became famous in Cuban music in the golden age of the bolero in the 1950s, the genre in which he could best express his sentimentality and musicality. “I

²⁴³ See Chapter 9

would have liked to sing opera, but I have the voice of a mango-seller, so I resigned myself to selling cherries from the piano bench,” he said with typical modesty and self-depreciation (Extremera, translated by Sublette 2004:485). Sublette describes him this way: “He was modest, self-deprecating, and homosexual” (2004:387).

Bola de Nieve incorporated fine musicianship and Afro-Cuban influences with sentimentality, some would say over-sentimentality. On stage he was always elegant (sometimes “over the top” with his smoking-jacket), light-spirited, and good humoured, invariably with a smile on his face. At times he exploited his dark-skinned and rotund physique as a means of good-hearted self-ridicule.²⁴⁴

Following the Revolution, Bola de Nieve became a dedicated supporter of Fidel Castro, and this is most probably the reason that in spite of his open sexuality he was one of the few homosexual artists not to be marginalised and condemned by the authorities in Cuba in the 1960s. Gay Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas wrote about him derogatorily: “*Era el calesero del partido comunista*” (“He was the slave-coachman of the Communist party”).²⁴⁵ Not only Fidel, but also the public and the cultural institutions embraced Bola de Nieve, though most likely due to his being unassertive rather than militant about his homosexuality, unlike the other openly homosexual cultural figures of the time, such as writers José Lezama Lima, Virgilio Piñera, and later Reinaldo Arenas, who were persecuted. Indeed, Bola de Nieve was the first--and so far the only--openly gay artist who gained a place of honour in the hall of fame of Cuban musicians, composers and performers, having been hailed by the cultural and political establishment as one of Cuba’s most important musicians.

In December 1999, I heard a typical tribute programme dedicated to him on Radio Habana, hailing him as “the spirit of Cuban music,” telling his life story, but ignoring his homosexuality, which, although widely known was systematically erased from anything officially written about him in Cuba, thereby “absenting this part of his identity must have been a factor in the drawing of his public image” (Jacobs 1988:25).

²⁴⁴ Such as when he sang the song “Babalú,” written by Margartia Lecuona, and made famous by white singer Miguelito Valdés, a comic song (imitating an Afro-Cuban dialect), describing the preparations for a *bembé* to the *orisha* Babalú Ayé, thus looking at *santería* as a curiosity/gimmick, and even ridiculing it.

²⁴⁵ In *Antes que anochezca* (*Before Night Falls*), 1992, quoted in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bola_de_Nieve (accessed 2.5.2009).

Jacobs writes about the “social mask” Bola de Nieve wore that led to his intellectual, cosmopolitan, chic and acquiescing image: “It is common knowledge that slavery and oppression wherever they have been found have led to the most profound adaptations in personality development and in the donning of social masks” (Jacobs 1988:25). In Bola de Nieve’s case, the outstanding trait of his mask was a perpetual smile expressing above all docility and gentleness, which became his hallmark.

The mask plus his modes were means by which he could gain acceptance in a *machista* and racist society which would otherwise be threatened by a more assertive demeanor. ... This mask lent Villa a kind of protective coloration which allowed him the opportunity to be assertive as a performer (ibid.:27).

“Mask” is a term I repeatedly encountered when talking to gays in Havana during my fieldwork, a general practice for survival and integration in the general society.

We have to put on a mask first of all as Cubans whenever we refer to the government and the Revolution, but especially as homosexuals when we want to be accepted by the general public. We always hide behind a mask of artistic intellectuals, revolutionary and strong supporters of the regime and anything Cuban, also a mask of being particularly polite and helpful to others. It is a protection. Sometimes this mask sticks to some [gays] face so much they cannot remove it anymore, even in their very private lives, and forget what is real and what is put on (Aurelio, 44, PersCom 2000).

One manifestation of Bola de Nieve’s “mask” was his sleek, humble, and “white” stage persona which some of my informants found disturbing. Jacob demonstrates how the semi-autobiographical song “Messié Julián”²⁴⁶ “mediates the performer’s stage persona and the social conditions underlying racism and homophobia in Cuba” (Jacobs 1988:24), and is sung by Villa in a jovial and mocking way, “making fun of oneself” (ibid.). “I am a sociable Negro, I am intellectual and chic” sings Ignacio, bringing out mockingly all that has been said about him, his “mask,” “international chic,” and need to be accepted and respected.

The ambivalence of the lyrics of Bola de Nieve’s boleros allows for “queer” interpretations, and as such they may be addressed to either a woman or a man, depending on the listener’s perception and understanding. They convey desperate, “impossible” love and self-pity. A good example is “No puedo ser feliz” which was mentioned above.

²⁴⁶ Audio: Appendix III/14

Bola de Nieve's recordings from the 1940s and 1950s are not as easy to obtain in Havana as more recent bolero recordings and artists. During my conversations with gay bolero fans, the name Bola de Nieve always came up as a "classic," with such comments as: "I adore him" and invariably adding that Villa was gay. Some were proud of their rare cassettes or CDs of Bola de Nieve, and moreover many gay black bolero fans showed a sense of pride in the fact that Villa was also black, and perhaps the only Cuban musician known to be homosexual and black.

Bola de Nieve is my favourite. He really takes me into my real feelings and heartbreak I experience once in a while with these mischievous Cuban men... When I listen to him, I know he's gay and it doesn't matter what the radio presenter or the heterosexual audience think, as the government and radio of course never tell people he was gay, and seldom dedicated these songs to women or interpret it that way. So it is a known secret to us maricones [faggots], and when he sings "no puedo ser feliz, no te puedo olvidar" [I cannot be happy, I cannot forget you], I know that deep inside he sings it to a man who broke his heart like this *ijo de puta* [son of a bitch] Carlito did to me... [sobbing]. (Aurelio, 44, PersCom 2000).

The divas

In the dictionary of Hispanic gay and lesbian culture, Alberto Mira describes the divas' role in the gay world:

The divas have to make us believe that they live in their own sphere and that the norms and conventions which apply to everyone, do not apply to them. ... Perhaps the key to the definition of Diva is the way she inhabits her own myth, the way her life becomes better through her creations (Mira 1999:235, quoted in Knights 2001:4,5. My translation).²⁴⁷

Manuel, a 42 –years-old bolero fan I met in the first bolero *fiesta* I described, and many times since in bolero *fiestas* at his home in Centro Havana, tells me:

We [gays] don't have "pop stars" like the straights do; we have divas that we can identify with. Like us they are larger than life, full of emotion and passion, lonely, surrounded only by some superficial admirers, but no real love, and considered bizarre and a bit crazy. Like us, they cry real tears, and tear into your soul with their roars and fingernails [He is particularly referring to La Lupe, known for her "roars"]. Like them, we need the stage to survive, and, away from it we are a wreck. Like

²⁴⁷ "Las divas deben hacernos pensar que viven en su propia esfera y que las normas y convenciones que se aplican a todos no sirven para ellas. Y deben convencernos de ella a través de su arte, en el que se combinan siempre la mujer y el mito ... Quizá la clave que define a la diva es el modo en que habita su propio mito, el modo en que su vida supura en sus creaciones" (Original text. Mira 1999:235, quoted in Knights 2001:4,5).

them, we are ridiculed yet desired in a distant way. Men will fantasise about our asses, but will not want to live with us, and like the divas, we too die lonely and sad (PersCom 2001).

Bolero is arguably the musical embodiment of the diva, even when sung by men--dramatic, painful, tragic, full of desire, longing, fantasy. I argue that not only that it is performed by divas, but the genre itself is of a “diva-like” nature, making the listeners feel and pretend to be divas along with the performer. Like the many drag queens I saw performing bolero onstage, in their kitchens, Aurelio and Angelito can shift in one breath from caressing their breasts or grabbing their crotches, to shedding real tears and waving their arms in anguish; exaggerated manifestations of pleasure and pain, pretending to be larger-than-life divas.

Both the diva and the bolero are sources of fascination and identification for Cuban homosexuals, especially those over 40, who have had to live deeper in the proverbial closet. The explanation given by Knights for the attraction of gays to *divas* can be employed to describe the attraction of gays to the bolero genre as a whole:

The fascination they exert for gay audiences is complex and may be accounted for by many factors including: identification with the marginal, with an aesthetic of emotional suffering and intense pain, with risqué eroticism and excess, with the semiotics of glamour (Knights 2001:5).

Olga Guillot (1922–2010) and La Lupe (1939–1992) are the two Cuban divas that were present in the cassette or CD collection of every gay bolero fan I met during my fieldwork. They are admired for their music, their life stories, and their dramatic “over-the-top” stage personae. Guillot with her trademark stage gestures described by Quiroga as: “coital reminiscence: trembling lips, fingers of both hands moving as if caressing pearly beads in front of her face, and then moving down to trace circles in front of her stomach, down to her sex” (Quiroga2000:145); and La Lupe for being “the craziest *loca* (“*la mas loca loca*”) that the world of music has ever known” as describes Aurelio, (PersCom 2000).

Olga Guillot: “La vida es una mentira” (Life is a lie)



Photo 10.3 (left) Source: <http://www.examiner.com/article/r-i-p-cuban-queen-of-the-bolero-olga-guillot>

Photo 10.4 (right) Source <http://migueliturriaen.wordpress.com/2010/07/30/the-queen-of-bolero-miguel-iturria-savon/> (both accessed 3.2.2011)

One of the prototypes of bolero divas in Cuba was Olga Guillot, known as “*La reina del bolero*” (“The queen of bolero”). Born in 1922 in Santiago de Cuba, Olga’s family moved to Havana, where she had already been singing professionally, even as a teenager. In 1945, she started singing bolero at a night club. Three years later, like many bolero artists of the era, she travelled to Mexico and established a successful international career. Guillot strongly opposed the Castro regime and in 1961 moved away from Cuba. Not surprisingly, since then her music has been banned in Cuba, adding even further appeal to this “forbidden fruit” for Cuban gays.

I always kept my cassette of Olga, even when I was hiding from the police in the UMAP days, and still have it. It’s in my collection together, with the pictures and love-letters from my lovers. It is in my little secret “homosexual box,” a little safe storing my true identity, even when I have to pretend to the outside world that I am something else. (Juanito, 55, PersCom 2000)

Just like Juanito, many gay bolero-lovers adore Guillot. During the Special Period, Olga Guillot was “brought out of hiding” and became the “kitchen bolero” diva of many over-forty year-old gays all over Cuba. Her speciality was, according to Quiroga, “the bolero of despair and eros, the song that produces the erotic charge of steamy sex under a

red light bulb, or the one sung by the woman after the man has left her panting, and she hides a knife under the pillow on a creaking bed where the sheets are wet” (2000:145).

Quiroga describes the audience at Olga Guillot’s concert in Madrid in 1998 as “a sentimental community, constructed around La Guillot as signifier” (2000:148). One might say that in Cuba there exists a “virtual sentimental community” composed of a network of Olga Guillot fans listening to her CDs and cassettes in the privacy of their homes. Cuban gays who have never had the chance to see her perform live, have adopted her as a symbol of escapism, fantasy, drama and resistance to oppression. They identify closely with the texts of her songs, like “La mentira” (“The lie”),²⁴⁸ and “Miénteme” (“Lie to me”),²⁴⁹ resonating deeply with the fact that Cuban society accepts homosexuals, on condition that they “live a lie”: they lie to others, and accept that others lie to them. This resonated with secrecy as one of the central themes in this study (see the section on secrecy, deviance and marginalisation, in Chapter 9)

La Lupe: a woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown



Photo 10.5 (left) Source: Album cover, “Lo mejor de la Lupe”. Fania Records



Photo 10.6 (right) Source: http://www.artinbase.info/artist/16717/La_Lupe/ (both accessed 3.2.2011)

La Lupe is perhaps the most extreme and subversive Cuban diva, with a disturbed

²⁴⁸ Audio:Appendix III/15

²⁴⁹ Video:Appendix II/29

personality and tragic life story and an outrageous stage performance which made her an object of admiration and identification among many Cuban gays I spoke with. Together with stained-glass Tiffany lamps and *Swan Lake*, Susan Sontag includes exiled Cuban singer Guadalupe Victoria Yoli Raymond, known as “La Lupe” in her list of examples which form the canon of Camp (Sontag 1964). La Lupe’s performances were a mixture of Camp, drama, hysteria, uncontrolled passion, and self-ridicule. She is “the craziest *loca* (*‘la mas loca loca’*) that the world of music has ever known” says Aurelio (PersCom 2000). Guardian reporter Sara Wajid describes her performance, as seen in the documentary film “La Lupe–The Queen of salsa” (dir. Ela Troyano, 2007): “Dressed in a skin-tight gold lamé cat-suit, she clutches her breasts, squeals ‘Ay! Aieeyee!’ in mock pain, grunts and removes her gold stilettos...”²⁵⁰ (Wajid 2008).

La Lupe emerged from the world of bolero and *filin’*, but took it to theatrical extremes. In pre-Revolution Cuba, she was already a cult figure, much admired by homosexuals but largely barred from the mainstream music industry. She was “the most outrageous female performer in Cuba at that time, breaking with social norms of decorum and passivity for women in her explosively dynamic performances” (Knights 2001:6). Wajid describes further:

In her shows she wore heavy makeup and revealing clothes more conventionally associated with *putas* [prostitutes]. She would laugh wildly, cry, swear at the audience, bite and scratch herself, hit Balboa [the pianist] with her shoes, lift her skirts, sit on people in the audience and moan and groan orgasmically (2008).

La Lupe’s wild and controversial style gained her a dedicated small audience of outcasts and homosexuals in Cuba, but did not go down well with Castro’s regime in the first years of the Revolution. In 1962, she left for New York, where Tito Puente, the “king of salsa” invited her to sing with his orchestra. Her wild performances became notorious and Puente, who began to feel threatened by her notoriety, fired her in 1968, complaining of her lack of discipline, and decided to fill the gap she had left with two drag queens, who were hired to “do Lupe”. Later he found a new Cuban singer, Celia

²⁵⁰ “The Scandalous Queen of Salsa” by Sara Wajid, *The Guardian*, Wednesday 1 October 2008. http://browse.guardian.co.uk/search?search=La+Lupe+%E2%80%93+The+Queen+of+salsa&search_target=%2Fsearch&fr=cb-guardian (accessed 3.5.2009).

Cruz who eventually became the new “queen of salsa.” La Lupe understandably felt betrayed.

According to Cuban director Ela Troyano, La Lupe was "an amazing artist who has never been given her due because she was black, and because her lyrics and her stance were very working-class" (Wajid 2008). Her flamboyant and risqué stage persona²⁵¹ and dramatic boleros turned her into a gay icon in the Latino world. Just like her songs, La Lupe's life-story is a series of tragedies, which adds a further dimension to homosexuals' identification with her.

In 1971 in New York she recorded two of her most famous and heart-wrenching boleros, “La tirana” (“The Tyrant”) and “Puro teatro” (“Pure Theatre”). The latter became a “gay bolero anthem” among Latino gays in the United States, and later (via cassettes imported by visitors from Miami) among gays in Cuba. Without any airplay on radio, banned because of her betrayal by defecting to the United States, “Puro teatro,” which was smuggled into Cuba by visitors from the United States, became an underground hit among Cuban gays, who readily identified with the lyrics at many levels, as described above. In an interview she gave the same year to *Look* magazine, La Lupe said: "I think people like me because I do what they like to, but can't get free enough to do" (Wajid 2008).

In the later 1970s, her career declined. In her last years, La Lupe became a devout Christian, vowing never to perform again, and died in poverty and obscurity in her early fifties. The story of her death in misery reached the gay community in Havana, adding yet one more element of drama and tragedy to her appeal and diva-dom.

Conclusion

The idea of musical genres, or forms, which reflect gay lifestyle has been discussed in the literature since the early 1990s, the age when gay musicology came into being, (Brett, Wood, and Thomas 1994; Currid 1995; Jarman-Ivens 2007). In spite of, or

²⁵¹ Video: Appendix II/30

perhaps because of, being a “stable” unchanging genre as described in this chapter, bolero is one of the main musical spaces in the gay *ambiente* during the Special Period, reflecting not only the lifestyle of many Cuban gays, but their emotional world, providing a much needed emotional *space* for identification and self expression.

Due to its discourse allowing queer and Camp interpretations, its tragic, rebellious and “deviant” heroes, and its melodramatic lyrics and performance style, bolero has a long history of appealing to Cuban homosexuals. In the needy and restrictive environment of Special Period Havana, and the dire lack of physical spaces for gay socialising and self-expression, this special appeal turned this particular musical form into an important emotional *space* for self-affirmation and consolation, mostly experienced at home.

Bolero is primarily an emotional *space*. It is experienced in private, where the music triggers a state of emotional transformation described in this chapter as “bolero mode”.

As for bolero as a social space, in Special Period Havana gays could not afford to enjoy bolero in its natural habitat—the nightclub—partially owing to lack of money to cover the admission fees and to the restrictive and discriminating door-policy, described above. Thus the creation of a “sentimental community” around bolero, as described by Quiroga in relation to gays in other Latino societies (2000:148), is restricted to private *fiestas* and drag shows, in which bolero divas are imitated by drag queens, and where gender ambivalence—one of bolero’s hallmarks—is joyously celebrated. In drag shows, bolero is often employed as a comic element, but also as an outlet for feelings and desire, and as a means of expressing sexuality. Another way (the most common one) to enjoy bolero as an emotional *space*, is to listen to it privately (or with friends) at home, on pirated cassettes or CDs, and on the radio.

This chapter has demonstrated bolero’s inherently queer and ambiguous character, present in its lyrics, music and performance, which causes the strong identification of gays with the genre. Popular themes in Bolero lyrics, such as danger, suffering, betrayal and lying, illusion and disillusion, and being “prohibited” resonate with the emotional and psychological (and sometimes even physical) world of many older-generation Cuban gays. Other common themes were extracted from the psychological layers of both bolero and Cuban gays: ambiguity, melancholia, nostalgia, hysteria, and liminality. As for the

music—the "tension" between the "African" and "European" elements express a dual identity, ambiguity and a social/cultural conflict, oscillating between a strong Cuban identity and a "global"/Pan-Latin one, and resonate with the unstable social/cultural status of Cuban gays. Finally, the style of performance celebrates drama, passion, erotic tension, and above all Camp, a gay sensibility.

By looking at the life stories of bolero's gay icons, another level of identification is revealed. On the one hand, through the image of the only openly-homosexual Cuban musician, Bola de Nieve, and his subordinate, docile "access" into, and acceptance by, conservative Cuban society; and on the other, through the controversial divas, "lip quivering" Olga Guillot, and "the craziest *loca* of all," La Lupe.

The relationship between bolero and the Cuban gay community is reciprocal. Gays maintain the bolero tradition, and bolero provides an important emotional *space* for gays in Special Period Havana. This is a space for self-expression and an outlet for feelings of deception, betrayal, frustration, and sadness. It is a space for identifying and for experiencing a sense of belonging to a community. In this case, it is to a sentimental community, an environment in which to express gay feelings freely, defying society's restrictions by allowing queer interpretations, and a chance to escape into an alternative world of drama, passion, and glamour, in complete contrast with the shabby reality of real life. Yet another function of bolero, as Angelito (45) puts it, is its therapeutic value: "I practice 'bolero therapy' for my nerves. Whenever I feel this kind of lump choking me in my throat, I put on my bolero CDs, and the tears just flow. The neighbours hear my singing and crying" (PersCom1997).

To sum up, this chapter showed how the three main functions of musical spaces in the *ambiente*, as featured in the title of this thesis (identity, interaction, and escapism) , are fulfilled by bolero which provides a significant interface for interaction with local and foreign gays on the one hand, and an outlet for escapism on the other. Bolero's main power, however, lies in its ability to cultivate a sense of identity and identification, sometimes reaching profound psychological layers, deeper than the mere performance of social or gender identity associated with other musical genres, as described in many recent music/identity works (such as Jarman-Ivens 2007; Sterling 2010).

At times the level of identification even encompasses the genre as a whole. When

I asked Aurelio, a forty-four-year-old bolero fan who spends most evenings listening to old bolero recordings in his kitchen, what bolero means for him, he replied: “*Bolero? ¡Yo soy el bolero!* [I am the bolero!] Passion, love, lies, heartbreak, drama... Bolero is the story of my life--beautiful, sad, dramatic, romantic, total, no compromise. This is me. *I am bolero!*” (PersCom 1997). ...A dramatic pause, a deep sigh, and Aurelio goes back to carry on with his cooking—a dinner of rice, beans and black-market lobster we had bought together that morning--for six friends, bolero aficionados, and one curious *amigo extranjero* who keeps asking questions...

Chapter 11

Conclusion: “¡Ya empezó la fiesta! (The party has already begun!)”

*Si no trajiste tus lentes oscuros seguro
no vas a ver amanecer
y no veras el final de esta fiesta...*

If you do not wear your dark glasses safely
You will not see the dawn
And you will not see the end of this *fiesta*...

Los Van Van's 1995 hit “¡Ya empezó la fiesta!” (The party has already begun!),²⁵² was one of the most popular *timba* tracks played at the gay *fiestas* I attended during the first five years of my fieldwork in Havana. Its title can be interpreted in the context of this thesis in more ways than one. Throughout my fieldwork period, there was always some party beginning somewhere in Havana, and on many occasions abruptly interrupted by a police raid, or a power-cut. *Habaneros* love to party. Even in the dreariest stretches of the Special Period, dominated by the financial crisis caused by the fall of the Soviet Union and subsequent withdrawal of financial support to Cuba, and the austerity measures introduced by Fidel Castro, the countless *fiestas* kept the blood running through the depressed city's veins. The *fiestas de diez pesos* were the life-line for the gay *ambiente* in Havana with its underground micro-cosmos.

On the metaphorical level there was, especially towards the end of my fieldwork period, a “feeling in the air” that in spite of the authorities' objection to any organised gay activity and the police harassment, the “big party” for Cuban gays “has already begun” and would soon be in full swing. Things have started to change for gays in Havana and the scene became more visible, as described in this thesis.

The gay *ambiente* during my research period was shaped and affected by the change and transition that Cuban society went through. This has been a “Special Period,” not

²⁵² Audio: Appendix III/16

merely in the economic sense, but also in ideology and conceptualisation, where the country was becoming less militantly socialist “in practice, if not discursively” (Moore 2006:225), and more in contact and in collaboration with the capitalist world, and its capitalist values and ideas. A paradoxical mixture of repression and liberation characterised the *ambiente* during the Special Period. With the absence of legal meeting places, the *redadas* on the illegal clandestine *fiestas*, the police harassment and the “cleansing operations”, the *ambiente* was still literally and metaphorically operating “in the dark”. At the same time it thrived on the steep increase in tourism to the island, including gay tourism. A by-product of tourism and the financial crisis was *jineterismo* (hustling and prostitution), the commercialisation and steady “capitalisation” of Cuban society and the new “private” economy. Another important factors in the evolution of the *ambiente* were the increasing access to foreign media and foreign concepts and ideas, the growing awareness of gay rights, the CENESEX campaigns for tolerance of sexual diversity, and the evolving gay identity influenced by global ideas and trends.

This thesis explores the relationship between music and gay identity in Havana during the Special Period. My research mission was to uncover and analyse the mental, physical and spiritual space that music provided for gays within the restrictions, paradoxes and challenges of Cuba's Special Period. I have argued that music was the trigger, the focus, and the main social and conceptual space for gays in Havana during the Special Period in their search for self expression and realisation. Music “provides means by which people recognise identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them” (Stokes 1994). In a society where music and dance are a way of life, they are also the primary medium in which homosexuals from all levels of society can express themselves, form a social identity, and interact (almost) freely.

Interpretation is the core principle and the main subject of this thesis, which is not concerned with the “objective” and “scientific”, but with the way music and other cultural, and even religious, phenomena are *interpreted* by Cuban gays during the Special Period in a way which makes them find “space” in it. In this sense, this thesis is based on queer and even Camp principles: “Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a "lamp;" not a woman, but a "woman." To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand “Being-as-Playing-a-Role” (Sontag 1964). Throughout this

thesis, from the *fiestas* to the *santería* ceremonies, I look at the concept of “woman” not only in its biological sense but also in its cultural sense, as per Dinarteill’s “social sex” category which also include effeminate gay men. “Being-as-Playing-a-Role” is another principle reiterated in this study. Furthermore, this thesis is not really concerned with the actual practice, the sexual behaviour, or political aspect of homosexuality, as in most researches on the subject—but with its behavioural and “identity” interpretive aspects, in relation to music.

This investigation covered the musical face of the *ambiente* during the last dozen years of Fidel Castro’s reign (1995-2007), a time of many developments, mirrored by new musical developments in Cuba such as *timba* and *reggaetón* as well as the nostalgic return to such older genres as bolero.

I have identified various types of “musical space” where I conducted my research as both observer and participant, from illegal clandestine parties held in changing locations, to ballet halls, drag-show bars, private living-rooms and kitchens and *santería* religious ceremonies. In addition to such physical meeting places, I looked into the concept of “space” in a wider sense, examining musical genres as emotional and conceptual spaces.

The five spheres I finally defined as “music spaces” and decided to concentrate on differed in terms of musical style and historical and cultural backgrounds. I first encountered certain skepticism, especially among Cuban scholars, when I introduced the hypothesis of a common “queer appeal” denominator linking popular dance music, *bolero*, ballet, drag-shows, and Afro-Cuban religion *santería*. Yet, my research, based on a grounded theory methodology, validated this hypothesis and has revealed deeper roots and linkages to this association.

The first such sphere described in Chapter 6 and analysed in Chapter 7--and the most popular kind of event taking place in the *ambiente*--is the “*fiesta de diez pesos*,” parties held clandestinely in changing locations around Havana, such as private houses, car-parks, derelict buildings, or parks. These *fiestas* are not only the most popular “space” in Havana’s gay scene, but crucial to my analysis of how music plays a central role in the gay *ambiente*. This is why my thesis uses “*fiesta de diez pesos*” as a title. The “*diez pesos*” part also resonates with the financial and commercial aspect of the *ambiente* during the Special Period, which is one of my arguments and a central theme in this

thesis. Within the physical space provided by each *fiesta*, I identified emotional and conceptual *spaces* fostered by the musical genres that were played, a mixture of international and local (house, salsa, *timba*, and, since the turn of the century, also *reggaetón*). While house music originated in gay clubs in the United States, the local musical genres that were played at the gay *fiestas* are regarded by Cubans as essentially “heterosexual,” and even sexist in nature. Yet, they have been appropriated and re-interpreted by Cuban gays and given new levels of meaning via interpretation and appropriation of the lyrics, the dance movements, et cetera. Musically, the featured genres share the common characteristic of intense, high-speed tempos and multiple climaxes. These factors, corroborated by previous research into Anglo-American “gay music,” are part of a “gay sensibility” and thereby provide another layer of identity and a psychological/aesthetic space.

Chapters 8 and 9 were dedicated to scenes in which performance and audience were involved, and the performance aspect was a vital part of the creation of the “space:” drag shows, ballet and *santería* religious practice. In two of the scenes, drag shows and *santería*, the “performance” is strongly connected to gender “performativity” in the Butlerian sense. However, most relevant to this thesis and the space provided by these scenes performance/audience is the “queer space” created among the audience, via the music, as described in Valentine’s work about the music of K. D. Lang (1995:474). The creation of a queer musical space requires the use of imagination, imagined “transformation” and fluidity, and a “gay discourse.” The discourse has a system of codification as “the meanings and identities attributed to different artists and their music in this way are not fixed but fluid imaginings which are continually reworked, elaborated on and renegotiated” (ibid.:475). This thesis, and particularly these two chapters, illustrated how this codification and “queer appropriation” takes places creating a “space within a space” though sometimes only observed by its members.

In these three “performance” spheres, I used Schechner’s performance theory’s concept of “integral audience” (2003[1988]:218–222). Whereas the “integrality” of the audience is clear in the *santería* context, elements of “integral audience” behavior can also be found in the drag shows and even among the gay audience in the ballet. In these cases, although these are entertainment stage performances and a ticket-buying audience

which is supposedly “accidental” according to Schechner, there is a strong element of participation including eye-contact, “gaydar” activity, changing mannerisms, and “body language.” These activities make the gay segment of the audience in these events “integral”. Schechner rightly claims that within an integral audience, “[c]hanges in the audience occur during performances as well as from one performance to another” (ibid.: 219). In our case, changes may occur when the audience members not only enjoy the performance, but identify with it and feel it represents or defines a certain identity to which they belong, and engage in a “gaydar” and eye-contact activity, not only in search of potential partners, but seeking complicity and sharing the covert identity experience

Chapter 8 featured two different “spaces” created around live stage performances, the only ones that gay Cubans during the Special Period could afford to attend, paradoxically at seemingly opposite ends of the spectrum--at one end, the performances of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba held in the Gran Teatro, and at the other, drag shows.

Drag shows are globally associated with gay culture and have been extensively investigated as such. However, in the specific context of Havana’s *ambiente*, they acquire a particular role of “space creating.” They are performed in various places and contexts, including, paradoxically, in workers unions and communist party events. However, in the context of this thesis, their main locations are drag *fiestas* at private homes, and the only “official” permanent “gay” venue operating in Havana during the Special Period, the Bar de Las Estrellas. The scene and the songs “performed” and impersonated create a space which provides the three main themes in this thesis’ title: identity, interaction, and escapism.

From the Bar de Las Esterellas operating in a remote and dilapidated residential block in what is supposedly licensed as a *paladar* (private restaurant), the distance to the city’s most luxurious venue, the Gran Teatro de la Habana, in the most central spot of the city, may seem huge. However, emotionally and conceptually it provides a similar experience and environment for gay socialising, interaction, and escapism. Paradoxically it is cheaper and more affordable for Cubans to attend the performances of one of the best ballet companies in the world, than that of drag queens in the Bar de Las Esterellas. The ballet provides a non-commercial space for gays to consume and identify with music and dance as members of the audience and identifies two levels of performance unfolding in

these spheres: one on-stage and the other in and among the audience.

Chapter 9 offered a (controversial to some) examination of African-Cuban religion *santería* and its practices, in which music plays an essential role. Although the presence of homosexuals in *santería* worship has been mentioned variously in previous literature, this thesis affects a deeper investigation into what makes this long-standing connection so important for the gay men who participate in it. Rather than inquire into the religion itself, the study focuses particularly on the musical and performance aspects (including dances in honour of the *orishas* and spirit possession) of *santería* worship and the way they are appropriated and interpreted by gay practitioners, of aspects of the practice, and on the bond that has developed between this religion and gays during the Special Period.

Finally, Chapter 10 was dedicated to a virtual space, private rather than public: *bolero*, a slow tempo nostalgic genre that Cuban gays use as a vehicle to express what they see as quintessentially romantic, seductive, dramatic, and tragic feelings. *Bolero* provides an emotional *space* for many gays in Havana, mostly the older generation. I have investigated the queer appropriations of *bolero* lyrics and the genre's characteristics which appeal to and resonate with Cuban gay culture--from its *Camp* overtones and inherent diva-ism, to the melancholia, hysteria, liminality, glamour, and sense of tragedy expressed in it and associated with it. Three of the Cuban "gay icons" identified with the genre were presented—openly known as homosexual *bolerista* Bola de Nieve, and divas Olga Guillot and La Lupe. A particular phenomenon described in the chapter is the identification of gays with the genre as a whole, thus its title, "I am bolero."

This thesis has a "landscape" character and focuses in each chapter on another scene in the *ambiente*'s landscape. This perspective shows how each segment of this landscape, the "forest," the "mountain," the "valley," the "sea-shore," (metaphors I used when explaining my methodology in Chapter 3), which in our cases are the *fiesta*, the kitchen, the drag show bar, the ballet hall, the *santería* ritual, and the emotional space of *bolero*), is affected by the same "weather conditions", i.e. the financial crisis, the social changes, the flux of tourism, *jineterismo*, the exposure to foreign influences, the evolvement of gay identity, etc. Landscape-based theoretical frameworks such as musicscape, ethnoscape, and even "homoscape", were presented and were put in the context of this investigation and its framework.

Tourists, known as *extranjeros* in local discourse, became in fact a major segment major in the ethnoscape of the *ambiente* during the Special Period. With the change in the regime's attitude towards tourism, once feared and now welcomed, Cuban society became obsessed with tourists and the ticket they offer to freedom and wealth, both literally and metaphorically. Many *timba* songs during the period dealt with this phenomenon, as was described in the chapters dedicated to dance music. Nearly all dance music shows featured a section where the singer asks the tourists in the audience to identify themselves: "is there anyone here from Italy, from Spain, from England ?", et cetera. Even this chapter's title song, "*¡Ya empezó la fiesta!*," has a long section of such "tourist salutes" and mentions Italy, Hawaii, France, China...

Que tal todo Italia bonasera o hanalulu

Yo no parle en francés yo no parle en chinua pero mi saludo te voy a dar... etc.

What's up all Italy, Good evening [in Italian] or Hanalulu [Honolulu]

I don't speak French, I don't speak Chinese [in broken French], But I am going to salute you...

Gay tourists indeed play an important role in this thesis, they are an active part of the *ambiente*, take part in my methodology as informants, and in the many mini-surveys I conducted. Furthermore, I show in the thesis how important their contributions are to the three main themes of this thesis: identity, interaction, and escapism.

Being a gay *extranjero* myself, I was in a participant-observant position, immersed in the *ambiente* during my fieldwork. After embedding myself in the scene and creating a social network web, I used a grounded theory method (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to develop my theory and analysis of the data, as explained in Chapter 3. In addition to this, and as part of the grounded theory philosophy of fieldwork, I gathered most of my data from observations, and numerous personal conversations (PersCom) with informants who were part of the scene I investigated. Discourse and levels of interpretation were therefore essential ingredients and the main substance in the data extracted and analysed. To verify the data and conclusions, I developed a methodology of "mini-surveys;" that is, very short questionnaires given to a group of between 20 to 40 informants categorized by age, sexuality or by origin (Cubans or tourists). The surveys featured questions or terms which evolved as repeating themes of substance ("meaning units," as per Ratner 2002) in my PersComs. These PersComs and mini-surveys helped me extract "central themes" (ibid.)

which kept emerging in conversations and observations relating to all the scenes.

These central themes are: gender and sexual ambiguity, interpretation, Camp sensibility, secrecy, deviance, marginalisation, liminality, alternative family/kinship, global/local duality, and “internationality”. Musical “central themes”, i.e. repeating musical concepts to be found in most featured genres and which were associated in the analysis sections with a gay sensitivity, are: repetition and cyclicity, non-closure/open-endings, acceleration and intensification, exaggeration/”over-the-top”/drama, high speed (bpm), and multiple climaxes. Based on literature about Anglo-American gay dance music, I argued that these characteristics provide another layer of appeal and identification, and I have identified these characteristics not only in the dance music played in the *fiestas*, but even in the sacred *batá* drumming patterns which controversially were interpreted by gay practitioners as reminiscent of a multi-orgasmic sexual act.

To summarise, this thesis has showed how music, in its broadest sense, including widely differing genres, and their lyrics, rhythms, and associated dances, has provided a crucial space for gay men in Havana, Cuba during the Special Period. Through music, these men affirm their identity, interact, and escape from a dreary and repressive reality and enter into a temporary world promising freedom and fun. Despite changing circumstances and new legislation promoting tolerance of sexual diversity and greater protection for gay rights, the research in this thesis strongly suggests that the true “glue” holding together Havana’s gay scene-- and the defining space for the *ambiente*--is and will continue to be, vibrant, informal and clandestine music events such as the *fiesta de diez pesos*.

Photo 11.1 2010: Gay parade in Havana.

Dr. Mariela Castro-Espín, head of CENESEX, marching with hundreds of gays and lesbians against homophobia and to celebrate “sexual diversity”, Havana 2010 (source: <http://nclrights.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/cuba-rally.jpg>. Accessed 3.12.2011)



Photo 11.2 2010: Policeman patrolling at “gay beach”.

At the same year, police patrolling in Havana’s unofficial “gay beach”, intimidating gay bathers. (Photo: Moshe Morad 2010)



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Filmography

Before Night Falls. 2000. DVD. Directed by Julian Schnabel (USA) New Line Home Video, 2001.

Fresa y Chocolate (Strawberry and Chocolate). 1994. DVD. Directed by Juan Carlos Tabío and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (Cuba). Walt Disney Videos (2004).

Gay Cuba (Director's cut). 1995. DVD. Directed by Sonja de Vries (USA/Cuba). Frameline.

Habana Blues. 2005. DVD. Directed by Benito Zambrano (Cuba/Spain). Polychrome Pictures.

Habana Libre. 2006. DVD. Directed by Eliezer Pérez Angueira (Cuba). Frameline

La Lupe –The Queen of Salsa. 2007. Film. Directed by Ela Troyano (USA/Cuba/Puerto Rico). Independent Lens, PBS.

Luchando. 2007. DVD (private copy from director / Sierra Madero). Directed by Noelle Stout(USA/Cuba). Independent.

Mariposas En El Andamio (Butterflies on the Scaffold). 1995. VHS. Directed by Margaret Gilpin and Luis Felipe Bernaza (Cuba). Water Bearers Films (1997).

Mauvaise Conduite (Improper conduct). 1984. VHS. Directed by Néstor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez Leal. (Cuba/France). New Video Independent.

Seres Extravagantes (Extravagant creatures). 2004. VHS. Directed by Manuel Zayas (Cuba/Spain). Malas Compañías P.C., S.L.

Appendix I: PersComs informants

An asterisk indicates a pseudonym per request of the informant. The year of birth is genuine as per the information I received from the informant. If the informant's occupation is relevant or if I used him as an 'expert' to a particular subject, i.e. bolero, *santería*, *fiestas*, *jineterismo* etc. this will be indicated in parenthesis. All PersComs took place in Havana, unless otherwise mentioned. The names are listed according to the month/fieldwork segment in which the first meaningful conversation with the informant took place, or used in a PersCom quote.

December 1995:

Adrián (Adrián Gonzales Machado). 1973. (main/first informant)

January 1997:

Yadel. 1976.

Yuri* 1971. (DJ).

Osmani. 1975.

Aurelio*. 1956. (Bolero)

Angelito*. 1952. (Bolero)

Pupi (nickname). 1962. (Musician).

Various employees in Casa de la Música, Galliano.

Ana (Jinetera). 1965.

July 1998:

No PersCom quoted

Dec 1999/ Jan 2000:

Yulieski*. 1977.

Miguel. 1955.

Elián. 1976. (Fiesta)

Yusded*. 1976. (Fiesta)

Paquito. 1976. (Fiesta)

Manuelito. 1976 (Medical student)

Alejandro . 1972. (Fiesta)

Juan*. 1974. ("Guajiro")

Manuel*. 1966. (Art teacher. Bolero)

Alfredo*. 1954. (Writer. Ballet)

Yankiel. 1975.

Marco. 1965.

Carlitos*. 1941. (Bolero)

Juanito*. 1945. (Bolero)

Adrián B. 1969. (different than main informant, Adrián Gonzales Machado)

Carlos*. 1965. (Choreographer)

Pablito*. 1953 (Santero)

Mariela (Maria). No age asked/given. (Transvestite/Santera)

Miguelito*. 1970. (Santería / Changó)
 Pedro. 1967. (Santería / Changó)
 Yasniel. 1975. (Santería / Changó)
 Elián B. 1978. (Santería / Changó)
 Fernán. 1967. (Santero)
 Carlos. 1965. (Santero)
 Eliades*. 1963. (Santero)
 Pedro. 1959. (Batalero)
 Ignacio. 1960. (Batalero)
 Luís. 1956.
 Tomasito. 1954 (Ballet)
 Javier 1965. (Santería)
 Lourdes. No age asked/given. Looks over 40. (Santera. Main santería informant)
 CJ. No age asked/given. (US independent anthropologist)
 AM. No age asked/given. (Cuban independent anthropologist)
 Various employees in Casa de la Música, Galliano.

July 2001:

Lolo. 1959
 Manuel. 1956. (Bolero)
 Pedrito. 1950. (Bolero)
 Fabrizio. 1969. (Italian Tourist. Fiesta)
 Raúl. 1976. (Fiesta)
 Yuri*. 1971. (DJ)
 Yunior. 1978. (Jinetero, Bolero)
 Miguel*. 1978. (Ballet dancer)
 Manuel [2]. 1964 (pharmacist. Ballet+Drag)
 Amed. 1968. (Santero, Akpwon)
 Oscar. 1966. (Batalero)
 Bachir. 1968. (Batalero)
 Pedro. 1955. (Santería)
 Juan Rodríguez. 1956. (Dance teacher, Miami US)

December 2003:

Pico. 1961.(On jineteros)
 Yuniel*. 1981. (Pinguero)
 Alexis (nickname). 1983. (Pinguero) [name not mentioned]
 Johnny (nickname). 1983. (Pinguero) [name not mentioned]
 Yordenis. 1976. (Fiesta)
 Amanda (stage name). 1976. (Drag queen)
 Julian. 1971. (US drag-queen visiting)
 Tommy. No age asked/given. Looks over 50. (ex Ballet teacher)
 Luís*. 1961. (Santero)
 Yendris*. 1976. (Santero)
 Raúl Santos. 1955. (Bolero, Mexico)
 Alberto. 1956

October 2005:

Dayron*. 1983. (Jinetero)
Yuslan. 1983. (Reguetón)
Mariela [2] (stage name). No age asked/given. (Drag queen)
Lázaro. No age asked/given. Looks over 40. (Babalao)
Javier. 1977.
Diego. 1975. (DJ)
Esteban. 1971. (DJ)
Amed. 1970. (Santería)

Dec 2006/Jan 2007:

Yasmani. 1978.
Anier. 1976.
Gerardo Ruíz. 1961. (ex-Activist, now living in Miami. PersCom via telephone from UK in December 2006, prior to trip to Havana)
Raúl Fernandez. No age asked/given. Looks over 40.(Bolero expert)
Yasmani [2]. 1980 (Drag queen)
Raúl [2]. 1969 (Usher in Gran Teatro)
Pedro [2]. 1966. (Batalero)
Prof. in University of Puerto Rico (name lost). (Comment during santería ritual)
Manolo. No age asked/given. (Santero from Puerto Rico. Comment during santería ritual)
Omar. 1983. (Rumba, Reggaetón)

Interviews (formal interview, rather than personal conversations):

Camilo Herrera Jiminez (manager of EGREM's export division).1998
Juan de Marcos Gonzáles (Musician: Sierra Maestra Afro-Cuban All Stars, BVSC).2003
Tomás Fernández Robaina (Anthropologist, ex gay activist). 2003
Dr Abel Sierra Madero (Anthropologist). 2006
Rafael Robaina (Director of the Centre of Anthropology, Havana). 2006
Dr Mariela Castro-Espín (Head of Cenesex, Cuba). 2009
Dr Nora Gámez-Torres (Anthropologist, Cuban popular music researcher).2010
Frank Palacios Naranjo (Musician: “Los 4” /reggaetón).2010

Mini survey dates:

1997:1
1998:1
2000:3
2001:1
2003:5
2005:2

Appendix II: Videos

“Fiestas de diez pesos” (Chapters 6,7)

1. Home gay *fiesta* in Havana. “Dancing identity”: the way of dancing represents a hybrid combination of projecting both Cuban identity and gay identity.
[Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OLvms0ml1tU&feature=related> (accessed 8.8.2010)]
2. Casino-style dancing. Excerpt from a Cuban TV programme called “Bailar Casino” (Dancing Casino.) [Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfgV1mRAeiU> (accessed 8.8.2010)]
3. Despelote: female dancers on stage and a male dancer joining in, during a live show of Charanga Habanera, Havana 2006.
[Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKdY4782pb8> (accessed 8.8.2010)]
- 4, 5,6. Homoerotic *reggaetón/perreo*: these are home-made YouTube clips of young Cuban men demonstrating solo *reggaetón* dance moves. Those clips are most likely filmed by tourist *amigos* (friends), or using cameras/phones which are *regalos* (gifts) from tourist friends. YouTube has many such video-clips, indicating a “trend” of young Cuban men who present themselves “to the world” as homoerotic objects via *reggaetón*. Many of the clips are marked as “gay”, such as clip 8 “gay boy dancing”.
[Sources: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3_cs79Z8SM&feature=Playlist&p=9A89A2A8E0CBC7A5&playnext_from=PL&index=64&playnext=2;
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w8Q8xWDhrFQ&feature=related>;
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uY6hME1_MSI (all accessed 3.7.2012)]
7. Calle 13 – “Atrévete-te-te” (Dare-dare-dare). 2006. With “gay icon” Residente. Note the gender ambiguity of the “multiplied” female figure in the clip, some of the “models” look like transgender. The song calls her/him/them to “dare and come out of the closet”. The band’s leader, Residente has expressed many times pro-gay and anti-homophobic views, and the band performed in Gay Pride events. This song became very popular in gay *fiestas* in 2006–2007, due to its ambiguous call to “come out of the closet”.
[Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vXtJkDHEAAc> (Accessed 8.8.2011)]
8. Baby Lores – “gay declaration”. Cuban *reggaetón* star Baby Lores is rumoured to be gay (not declared), and there is even a rumour (supposedly spread by his “rivals”) that he used to be a *pinguero* (male-to-male prostitute). He was formerly in Cuba’s leading *reggaetón* band Clan 537 with Chacal, his co-star. This parody clip posted on YouTube is based on the rumours about both of them being gay, using two “lookalikes”, and is called “Baby Lores y Chacal – Clan 537 declaran gay” (Baby Lores and Chacal from clan 537 declare themselves gay). There is also a derogatory reference in the clip to the gay nature of *reggaetón* in general.
[Source: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qr_imzaAZG4 (accessed 8.8.2010)]
9. Dandy Yankee – “Gasolina”. 2004.
[Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGKrc3A6HHM> (accessed 8.8.2010)]

Drag shows (Chapter 8)

10. A “home” drag-show in a flat in Central Havana, 2005.
[Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L67mrTj69Tc&feature=related> (accessed 1.8.2010)]
11. “Vivir Vivir” (To Live, To Live), original vocals by Lita de Real, drag impersonation.

Dedicated to HIV carrier Samantha de Monaco. The last scene from the 1995 Cuban underground documentary “Mariposas en el Andamio” (Butterflies on the Scaffold).

12. Rocío Jurado – “Como Yo Te Amo”.
[source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7Sr0l3y7I8&feature=related> (accessed 8.6.2012)]
13. Annia Linares – “Ojalá” (originally by Silvio Rodríguez)
[Source: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xz_-ocBFzjw (accessed 8.6.2012)]
14. Drag impersonation by drag queen Maridalia of “Ojala” by Annia Linares (15). Drag show in Havana. [Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6zlPlrGGG4> (accessed 8.8.2010)]
15. Chenoa – “Cuando tu vas”
[Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tJaZWbZr4qY&feature=related> (accessed 8.8.2010)]
16. Valeria Lynch - “Te lo mereces”
[Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5xHyOA4PxM4> (accessed 8.8.2010)]
17. Malú – “Te conozco desde siempre”
[Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DD0kc1bX2I0> (accessed 8.8.2010)]
18. Maggie Carles – “Una mujer de carne y hueso”
[Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GErF6TxPsZw> (accessed 8.8.2010)]
19. Maggie Carles – “Tu vas amarme”
[Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vlkfYIdWvfc> (accessed 8.8.2010)]
20. Drag queens Cinthia y Lia amaral impersonating Maggie Carles – “Tu vas amarme” (21)
[Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQOAEb1mtEg> (accessed 8.8.2010)]
21. Drag queen Imperio performs a drag-show “standard”, which has been appropriated by Cuban gays as a “gay anthem”: “Que Hablen” (Let Them Talk), written by the sisters El Diego. It is a song dedicated to the Cuban diva, soap-opera actress Marta Casañas, originally sung by Mirta Medina.
[Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lel00975W0c> (accessed 8.8.2010)]
22. Drag-show in a gay *fiesta*. Kiriam, one of Havana’s best known drag queens performing in a home *fiesta*. 2005. [video taken by Moshe Morad]

Santería (Chapter 9)

23. Music and trance in *santería*; from a *toque* in Zanja, Central Havana.
This clip demonstrated some of the issues raised in Chapter 9. Femininity: There are predominantly women in the ceremony. Musical characteristics : cyclical/repetitive , *accelerando* and *crescendo*. Gradually gaining speed, and evoking a state of trance in the “dancers”. The “dancers” (female) are in a state of trance and open for “possession”, while the musicians, the *batá* players and the *akpwon* (male), are completely focused. Their expressions show they are “in control” and are not getting into the trance, like some of the other participants.
[Source: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iyVC7_tUazA&feature=related(accessed: 1.8.2010)]
24. *Toque* for Changó in Havana.

This clip demonstrated more of the issues raised in Chapter 9. “Audience”: women and gays. The person possessed is a young EPH, dressed in a red (colour of Changó) rolled-up vest (homoerotic/*santería* “fashion”), dancing and getting possessed (“mounted”) by Changó (abrupt jerky movements).
[Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFdQbintZN0> (accessed: 1.8.2010)]

25. Dance representation of Yemayá.

Ballet Folklorico de Camaguey with famous *akpwon* Lázaro Ros. 2003.

The dancer representing Yemayá is dressed in the typical blue and white colours. The dance movements are feminine, round, imitating sea waves.

[Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yvbx88FEWY8&feature=related> (accessed: 1.8.2010)]

26. Dance representation of Changó.

Conjunto Folklorico Nacional, directed by Rogelio Martínez Furé.

The dancers are young virile men, portraying a macho image, dressed in red and white, Changó’s colours. The dance movements are typically jerky and sharp and in some instants may be interpreted as homoerotic (see at timing 3:10’).

[Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tj5HmPwCM2g> (accessed: 1.8.2010)]

27. Changó dance, from a Cuban TV programme “la rumba y el tambor”.

Performance: Agrupación de Güiros El Niño de Atocha

[Source: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=9qArPjQvWac]

Bolero (Chapter 10)

28. Bola de Nieve – “No Puedo Ser Feliz “ (I cannot be happy).

This clip includes still photos and vintage film footage.

[Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QD6ZC7Fo9Hs> (accessed 12.8.2010)]

29. Olga Guillot – “Miénteme” (Lie to me).

[Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z35VFdxJV6I&feature=related> (Accessed 12.8.2010)]

30. La Lupe performing on “the Myrta Silva show” / Puerto Rican TV (date unknown).

[Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3kRIV23LQyI&feature=related> (Accessed 13.8.2010)]

31. La Lupe: “Puro Teatro” (Pure Theatre) as a parody metaphor to Special-Period Cuba.

An anti-Castro video-clip posted on YouTube, using La Lupe’s famous song “Puro Teatro” with images of Castro and Cuba during the Special Period, conveying the message that what Fidel says is a lie (as per the song: “Excuse me, but I don’t believe you. I think it’s all pure theatre”). In the beginning of the clip, over a picture of Fidel the headline says: “interpreted by the *real* symbol of Cuba, La Lupe”, indicating that the marginalised and banned singer in exile represents the *real* Cuba, and not Fidel Castro and his “theatre” propaganda.

[Source: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ZhXCX5uwvg&feature=PlayList&p=6216EE2994BD5710&playnext_from=PL&playnext=1&index=16 (accessed: 2.9.2010)]

*

32. First “Gay Pride” party in Havana’s “gay beach”, Mi Cayito. 14 June 2008.

[Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vy46pAVaHw> (accessed: 1.8.2010)]

33. “Day against homophobia” parade, organised by CENESEX. Havana, 16 May 2009

[Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o7GGGHME4xE&feature=related> (accessed: 1.8.2010)]

Appendix III: Audio

1. “No Money”
Artist: Interactivo, from CD “Goza Pepillo”. 2007. DM Ahora, Cuba
2. “El Pecado Original” (The Original Sin)
Artist: Pablo Milanés, from CD “Origenes”. 1994. Fonocaribe, Cuba
3. “Él Tiene Delirio de Amar Varones” (He Is Crazy about Loving Men)
Artist: Pedro Luís Ferrer, from CD “100% Cubano”. 1995. Private release.
4. “Hombre de Silicona” (Silicone Man)
Artist: Carlos Varela, from CD “Como Los Peces”. 1995. Bis Music, Cuba
5. “Lola”
Artist: Moneda Dura, from CD “Mucho Cuida’o”. 2000. EGREM, Cuba
6. “La Bruja” (The Witch)
Artist: José Luis Cortés y NG La Banda, from CD “The Best of NG La Banda”. 1999. Hemisphere/EMI, UK
7. La Gasolina
Artist: Barrio del Rio, Boootleg *reggaetón* compilation sold in Havana.
8. El Matador – Bullfighting music
Demonstrated by amateur guitarist
9. “I Feel Love”
Artist: Donna Summer. From “The Dance Collection”, xxx
10. “It’s Raining Men”
Artist: The Weather Girls, from CD “Success”. 1990 (1982), Sony Music, USA
11. “Changó”
Artist: Abbilona, from CD “Tambor Yoruba, Changó”. 1999. Caribe Productions, Cuba
12. “Que Viva Changó”
Artist: Celina Gonzáles, from CD “Orishas y Santos”. 1995. EGREM, Cuba.
13. “Tú Me Acostumbraste” (You Got Me Accustomed To)
Artist: Frank Domínguez, from CD “Canta Sus Canciones”. 2008. ARO, USA
14. “Mesie Julian”
Artist: Bola de Nieve, from CD “Sus Grandes Exitos”. 1991. Modiner, USA
15. “La Mentira” (The Lie)
Artist: Olga Guillot, from CD “Sabor A Mí”. 2000. CNR, Argentina
16. “Ya Empezó La Fiesta” (The Party Has Already Begun)
Artist: Los Van Van, from CD “The Best of Los Van Van”, 1999. Hemisphere/EMI

Appendix IV: Understanding Cuban homosexualities: From the Yoruba gender ambiguities, via transculturation, to revolutionary homophobia

Unlike the relatively clear Eurocentric perception of homosexuality as the tendency of a person to be sexually attracted to his own sex, throughout history and even within the timeframe of this research, Cubans have acquired different perceptions of homosexuality, and different stigmas related to them, based on the sexual role rather than the choice of partner. Masculine active homosexuals (“penetrators”) are not stigmatised in the way sexually passive (“penetrated”) homosexual men are, who, in the Latino understanding, take the role of women both in their social behaviour and in bed, and therefore deviate “from traditional male appearance and manners” (Lumsden 1996:29). This is why it is easier sometimes for Cubans to accept transvestites or transsexuals who are “men turned into women” (and therefore abide to the clear male-female dichotomy), than to accept effeminate homosexual men who are “in between”, or masculine men who like to be sexually penetrated.

To understand the complexity of Cuban homosexualities, and the way Cuban society behaved and the Cubans' approaches to gender and homosexuality, one needs to take into consideration the three main cultural layers upon which the Cuban history is based: each one with a very different approach towards homosexuality - the African slaves heritage, the Spanish catholic conquerors' heritage, the combination of the two of them described by Ortiz as “transculturation”, and the latest mid 20th century addition to the cultural/conceptual “mix” – the revolution and its ideology.

In his historical analysis of 1940, *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (*Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*), Cuban ethnomusicologist and culture researcher Fernando Ortiz coined the term “transculturation”, as a means of explaining Cuba's cultural evolvement. Unlike “acculturation”, which, according to Ortiz “is used to describe the process of transition from one culture to another, and its manifold social repercussions” (1995[1940,1947]:98), and “implies the acquisition of a culture in a unidirectional process” (Coronil, in Ortiz 1995[1940,1947]:947:xxvi),²³⁹ “transculturation”, the notion of converging cultures, is based on the destruction of the original culture (“deculturation”) and the creation of a new culture (“neoculturation”) (ibid.). The new term was developed further in the 1970s and 1980s by Angel Rama in

reference to Latin America ([1985 [1982]], but was subsequently disputed as archaic and replaced by scholars with other conceptual categories such as “hybridity” and “heterogeneity” (Cornejo Polar 1994, Trigo 2000). Nevertheless, the term has been gaining popularity again since the early 1990s, and Trigo suggests that ²³⁹ “the possibility of an epistemological updating and pragmatic re-activation of transculturation under the current transnational framework” , and adds that this is “less [thanks to] to *transculturation's* epistemological competence than to its ideological and affective resonances” (2000:85). Trigo also reflects on the nostalgic and allusive charm of the term “which had fascinated Rama – and which constitutes an important anticipation of postmodern dissemination” (Trigo 2000:86).

Transculturation’s modernised versions –“transnational transculturation”, “hybrid transcultures”, and “transcultural heterogeneity” (Trigo 2000:102) –are used by contemporary scholars in relation to the ongoing processes of urbanisation, *mestizaje* (the fusion of various ethnicities and cultural traditions) and migration, in Latin America. However , originally Ortiz coined transculturation with a much wider scope in mind, intending it to act as the key for understanding “the evolution of Cuban folk, either in the economic or in the institutional, legal, ethical, religious, artistic, linguistic, psychological, sexual, or other aspects of its life” (1995[1940,1947]:98). I propose using the concept of transculturation to understand the evolvement of homosexuality and gay identity in Cuba.

Futhermore, looking at the Special Period as a whole brings the term back to life: the Special Period itself is characterised by the destruction of old values and the creation of new, liberal, and capitalist values. Cuban homosexuality during this period likewise has been going through a deculturation process through the destruction of old concepts of “homosexualities” ruled by the *maricón/bugarrón* duality and “neoculturation” through the emergence of a new “global gay identity” influenced by tourism and by global trends, as described in Chapter 4. More than sixty years ago Ortiz indicated Cuban sexuality as one of the fields affected by the process of transculturation. By coincidence it was in the anthropological foundation called after Ortiz that I first met Dr Abel Sierra Madero, my main research ally in Cuba, who dedicated extensive research to sexuality in Cuba.

When looking at Cuban homosexuality, however, perhaps like at any other

transcultural processes in Cuba, one must look at the original cultural sources leading to the new “transculture” , either by “deculturation” as Ortiz claims, or by “hybridity” where elements of both cultures exist in the new one.

In Yoruba culture, the main African cultural source of “Cubanity” one finds gender/sexuality concepts which differ from the Eurocentric ones, resonate in other “non Eurocentric” cultures, and can shed light on attitudes in African-Cuban religion towards femininity and homosexuality, and at the complexity of indigenous “homosexualities”, in our case – Cuban. Rather than looking at Yoruba religion as “genderless” as Oyewumi suggests (1997, See also Appendix IX) , I suggest that different indigenous cultures, including Yoruba, have “gender systems” which are different from the Eurocentric one, including a different concept of “homosexuality”. Much has been written about the Beardache among Native North Americans, and the Hijra in India in this respect (Whitehead 1993, Nanda 1993) In heressay “Hijra as Neither Man Nor Woman” Nanda writes:

Whereas Westerners feel uncomfortable with the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in such in-between categories as transvestism, homosexuality, hermaphroditism, and transgenderism, and make strenuous attempts to resolve them, Hinduism not only accommodates such ambiguities, but also views them as meaningful and even powerful (1993:547).

In our case , this “accommodation of ambiguities” explains the multiple and changeable genders of African-Cuban religion’s deities and the tolerance towards gay worshippers, two subjects presented and discussed in chapter 10, but on a larger perspective it allows a more flexible and complexed view of gender in society, unlike the simple binary sexual-organs based Eurocentric approach, and intertestingly enough , in spite of, or perhaps because of, being considered “primitive”, resonates with post-modern queer theory ideas about gender.

Whithead writes about “The larger cultural and social context of gender-crossing” (1993: 514-522), and identifies it in spiritual manifestations (often in human form, but also in animal and nature object forms)appearing in visions in the native North American context, among other idiosyncrsies (ibid.:515) . “In these areas where the vision ideology was highly developed, a complex casuistry of supernatural assistance, trickery, or neglect underlay the gradual differentiation of social identities that took place as each

generation reached its social prime, and gender-crossing, along with many another distinctive idiosyncrasy, was readily encompassed by this ideology” (ibid.).

Indigenous religious cosmology in many cultures also offers cross-gender or transgender deities. For example, Hinduism features cross-gender and dual-gender deities, such as Shiva, who incorporated both male and female characteristics, and with whom *hijras* identify; and Vishnu and Krishna who in Hindu mythology are male deities who transform themselves as women, and who are sometimes portrayed in androgynous ways. (Nanda 1993:548). In our case this is the case with some of the orishas who have male and female dimensions. (See Chapter 9).

Compared to the complexity and multiplicity of gender and sexuality variants in indigenous cultures, and in our case the Yoruba culture, the European “homophobic heritage” was much simpler. Fidel Castro blamed the Spanish conquerors: “We got our machismo from the Conquistadors, just as we received other bad habits” (Castro 1992).²⁵³ Sublette describes how male homosexuals were burned at the stake by the inquisition in Cuba (Sublette 2004:71), and Lumsden connects homophobia and *machismo* to the patriarchal nature of Cuban society (Lumsden 1996:28).²⁵⁴ The 1959 Revolution added insult to injury with its own dose of ideological homophobia, in spite of its “equal rights” ideology and atheistic indoctrination. “Manhood” represented by the fighter, and the *guajiro* (peasant) became the revolutionary ideal, whereas decadence was represented by prostitution and sexual deviance. Homosexuals became enemies of the Revolution. The revolutionary regime undertook to “correct” Cuban people, “curing” them from the ills, of colonialism and US imperialism. Homosexuality was denounced by the revolutionary regime as both socially unacceptable and as politically subversive, and the government embarked upon a pervasive effort to rid the nation of homosexuality. In the mid-1960s homosexuals and those suspected to be so (i.e., men who showed signs of effeminacy), as

²⁵³ Source: <http://www.globalgayz.com/country/Cuba/view/CUB/gay-cuba-news-and-reports-2003-07.html> (accessed: 1.3.2008).

²⁵⁴ We indeed see that in matriarchal segments of Cuba society, such as in *santería* religion, there is a higher tolerance towards homosexuals (see Chapter 9).

well as others perceived as non-conformists or non-revolutionary, were detained in the UMAP labour camps. The UMAP programme ended in 1968, possibly due to international pressure by foreign leftist intellectuals close to Castro; however, the persecution of homosexuals in Cuba continued, as described in detail by Lumsden in a chapter titled: “Institutionalized homophobia” (1996:55–80). Abel Prieto, one of Cuba’s more liberal ministers, admitted in 2007 that during the 1960s and 1970s homophobia existed even in the universities and among intellectuals. (Hernández 2007).

In 1979 the legal situation regarding homosexuality drastically improved when sodomy was removed from Cuba’s criminal code, and sexual relations between same-sex consenting adults sixteen years old and over were legalised.

In the 1980s the Mariel boatlift from Cuba to Miami organised by Cuban-Americans with the agreement of Fidel Castro was another milestone in the history of Cuban homophobia. Not surprisingly, following twenty years of institutionalised homophobia and repression, many gays seized the opportunity to leave the island, and the Cuban media coverage drew attention to this, labelling them as *escoria* (scum), and associating them with criminals and drug addicts (Bejel 2001:108).

The obligatory quarantine of HIV+ Cubans between 1986 and 1994 in treatment centres/sanatoriums – known colloquially as *sidatorium* (from the Spanish acronym SIDA = AIDS), is seen by some as yet another manifestation of institutionalised homophobia (Lumsden 1996:162–163), though many of the internees in the first years were heterosexual and many gay HIV+ patients I met admitted that they would not have been treated so well if they had remained at home during that period.

Although institutionalised homophobia eased substantially towards the years of my research period, police harassment remains one of the main features of the gay *ambiente* in Havana, as described in this thesis.

Paradoxically, by suppressing Catholicism, the revolution made one very important contribution to bettering the life of homosexuals on the island “[The church’s] ability to influence public attitudes on issues such as abortion, contraception, and homosexuality is insignificant” (Lumsden 1996:45). Although the power of the church has gradually risen since Lumsden wrote this statement, with the increasing tolerance towards religious practice, and following the visit of the Pope in 1998, unlike other Latin American

societies, Catholic-derived homophobia is virtually non-existent in Cuba.²⁵⁵

In September 2010 Cuba's ex-president Fidel Castro admitted for the first time that he was responsible for the persecution and the discrimination against gays in Cuba in the 1960s and 1970s and that he regrets now for not paying enough attention to "the great injustice" inflicted. He reasons it for his being "immersed in the October Crisis (the Cuba Missile Crisis of 1962), in war, in political issues".²⁵⁶

Perhaps the most interesting period in Cuban history of homosexuality, a time of change and transition, oscillating between local/indigenous concepts of homosexuality to global gay identity, is the Special Period, to which this thesis is dedicated.

²⁵⁵ During my visit to Havana in 1995, I was surprised to see a group of transvestites freely visiting the main cathedral in old Habana, and lighting candles, without noticing any hostile looks from the priest or the (very small) congregation.

²⁵⁶ "Fidel Castro regrets discrimination against gays in Cuba", in the Telegraph, 1 September 2010. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/centralamericaandthecaribbean/cuba/7976488/Fidel-Castro-regrets-discrimination-against-gays-in-Cuba.html> (accessed: 3.9.2010).

Appendix V: Geertz's "Levels of Interpretation" theory in the context of this study

Clifford Geertz lays down three layers of interpretation applied in an ethnographic description: "It is interpretive; what it is interpretive of is the flow of social discourse; and the interpreting involved consists in trying to rescue the "said" of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms" (1973:20).

The present research deals with levels of interpretation and appropriation. Interpretation is used here not only as a means to process data, but in most cases *is* the data I am after. Interpretations are therefore more important here than any "objective" historical truth, if there is one. I am concerned with the way gays in Special-Period Havana view and interpret a certain genre or musical environment, rather than the genre's original role and the intention of its inventors, composers, or performers. For example, I am not concerned with the true "real-life" subject of a certain *bolero* love or betrayal song, and what the writer's experience was, but with the "queer interpretation" given to the song by Cuban gays (Chapter 7). Rather than describe or investigate music itself, I delve into the effects of such music on gay men in Special-Period Havana, what it signifies for them, and how they interpret it. In the context of my research, music is therefore purely functional – an interface for interaction, a means of seduction, a means for communication with the "gods", an outlet for fantasy and escapism, an excuse, a "space" of identity, and so forth. In this sense, the issue is not about what music is, but how it is perceived and what it is used for. Likewise, I am not concerned with the biology or psychology of gender and sexuality, but with their perception in Special-Period Havana. What matters is not whether my informants practice homosexuality, or what they do in bed, but how they perceive their "being gay", what the social and cultural aspects of this gay identity are, and how music facilitates it.²⁵⁷

Building on Butler's theory of gender and sexuality as performance (1990, 1999), the present study involves the juxtaposition of two performance spheres: gender/sexuality + music. Performance is a way of interpretation. The focus here is not on the "real", but on the perceived, the performed. Interpretation, therefore, plays a major role

²⁵⁷ Even when I discuss what I describe as EPH (effeminate passive homosexuals) in *santería* (Chapter 7), I am not concerned with the individuals' actual sexual behaviour, but with the way they are perceived by themselves and by others, their "sexuality performance", rather than their genuine sexuality.

both in the description and the analysis, and is not only a methodological tool but the core of the thesis.

During my fieldwork in the *ambiente* and its clandestine activities, codes, hidden meanings and levels of interpretation, I constantly engage in decoding, interpreting, focusing on subjects, sometimes unnoticed, and telling, using Geertz's analogy mentioned earlier, "which was twitch and which was wink" (1973:6). Still, I don't only bring my own interpretations and tie them up to existing or new theories, but also my informants' interpretations in their own words using their own discourse, thus the abundant use here of anecdotal evidence and PersComs. Using Geertz's analogy, I describe the eyelid movement, bring the person's comment that it was a twitch, and my own interpretation that it was a wink, an analysis combining both *emic* and *etic* elements.

Extracting meanings out of behavioural patterns and anecdotal evidence, and "sorting out the structures of signification" (ibid.:9) is an important part of my analytical method. As the area I am dealing with is highly interpretive and loaded with social (and sometimes personal) prejudice, and as the group researched is on many occasions talking in "codes" and double meanings, I would rather rely on interpretations from informants who belong to the researched group and on myself (being gay, and therefore more attuned than non-gay researchers to certain inter-gay codes), than on external "experts".

Here is an example demonstrating the importance of "gay-sensitive" observation and interpretation in the field: I joined two other non-gay researchers for a *santería* ritual performed at a house in old Havana in 2000: C. J., an American anthropologist; and A. M., a Cuban African-Cuban culture expert with a "purist" attitude, whose agenda is preserving "authentic" Yoruba-originated culture and religion, and who rejects what he calls "superficial *santería* trends". The *iyawó* ("bride", an initiate undergoing his ritual year), was a very effeminate man in his late thirties (who later became one of my informants). C.J.'s impression of him was: "Carnavalesque. It is a performance. This guy is either gay himself, or imitating one, even ridiculing it" (PersCom 2000). A.M.'s impression: "He is very feminine, imitating Yemayá.²⁵⁸ I don't know if he is gay or not. He exaggerates the moves. Yemayá does not need to be portrayed like this" (PersCom

²⁵⁸ A female *orisha* (diety) in *santería* religion, associated with femininity, motherhood, and the ocean. See Chapter 9.

2000). My observation, which was later confirmed when the guy became my informant, was that he is an “old-style” *maricón*, attracted to active *macho* men (I have noticed him checking out masculine-looking men, including myself, in the room, before going into a trance). The *santería* house is an alternative family for him²⁵⁹, and provides him a space for expression and identity, and the ritual gives him an outlet to express his femininity. My interpretation in this case was more accurate, and provided a better understanding of the “space” that *santería* provides to gays, the subject of Chapter 9.

²⁵⁹ A concept which will be discussed in chapter 9

Appendix VI: The Buena Vista Social Club syndrome: a soundtrack of the “imagined community”

A prime example of “music *jineterismo*” since the late 1990s is based on what I call “The Buena Vista Social Club Syndrome”. The worldwide success of the 1997 album released by the UK label World Circuit and the 1999 film directed by Wim Wenders featuring a group of veteran Cuban *son* and *bolero* singers and relating their stories, caught both Cubans and Cuban tourist authorities by surprise. During my visit in 2000, tourists on the island were enquiring about the music and the film heroes, at the time when the huge film and CD success had been virtually not yet known in Cuba. According to Cuban musician Juan de Marcos Gonzales, the initiator of the project and its musical A&R producer, it had all started in a “musical revival” idea thrown by him to a UK record executive during a party at the London home of my supervisor on this thesis, Dr. Lucy Durán. The idea was to create a “*son* revival” by gathering veteran Cuban *soneros* such as Compay Segundo, Ibrahim Ferrer, Omara Portuondo, Eliades Ochoa and others. Another project initiated then was the “Afro-Cuban All-stars” album, dedicated to African-Cuban songs. The record executive suggested to involve American musician Ry Cooder. The result was a global success that eventually led to the production of the film.

Musically, this project is far from being geared at the musical taste of Cubans, especially with the US style production and the inclusion of blues-style slide guitar of Ry Cooder. It wasn’t meant for the Cuban public, as the initiator of the ideas and the musical producer of the project, Cuban musician Juan de Marcos Gonzales (PersCom2006) puts it, but rather it was a way of selling Cuban music to outsiders, and indeed it has become one of Cuba’s main tourist attractions since the late 1990s. BSVC initiated a whole wave of “son revival” in Cuba, embraced and supported by the authorities, for exactly the same purpose as *jineteros* used it – attraction and money.

Abigail Wood rightly points "discussion of the 'needs' of contemporary revivalists has largely focused upon ideological and musical considerations rather than upon the functional aspects of musical revivals and their relationship to wider aspects of an individual's cultural life." (2007: 267). The functional aspects of musical revivals are in many cases not just cultural, but also financial. Indeed, many sponsored ‘folk revivals’

which spark important and beneficial musical and ideological debates, have similar “backstage” financial intentions, as was in this case – to start with by the UK record label and film production company, and later by the Cuba tourism authorities that “jumped on the wagon”.

. A ‘revival’ is many times tailored to the needs of its initiators, reviving only a certain selected theme or genre. Chris Goertzen writes in his essay about folk revival in Norway: “each [revival] “revives” selected cultural goods in ways representing the modern needs of those sponsoring the revival, needs that may change as one set of sponsors succeeds another” (1998:99). This was the case here, with the “revival” of *son* and *bolero* in a US-style production to suit non-Cuban ears.

Since the late twenties “BVSC music” became an important interface for tourist-local relations in Havana, and a major drawing tool, from the repertoire played by street bands in cafés and bars, to a “chatting line” used by locals to strike a conversation with tourists, a phenomenon I witnessed in many cases in the gay meeting areas. It even became an important “commodity” offered by locals as part of what I describe as “music *jinetesimo*” (Chapter 5). Many of my informants told me that they don’t possess the album (not even on a pirated CD or cassette which Cubans usually buy on the streets) but they know the songs by heart:

It is very old- fashioned music of ‘*abuelas*’ [grandmas]. Not really our [young Cubans]. , When I see *extranjeros* in the Malecón I start smiling and talking to them, and after two or three sentences – ‘where you from’ and the usual small talk I ask them: “do you like Cuban music?buena vista?”. They immediately smile and I tell them my grandfather used to sing in the Casa de la Trova in Santiago with Ibrahim Ferrer and Compay Segundo , and he taught me to sing, and I start singing “Dos gardenias” or “Chan chan”. They melt... this trick always works... As for my grandfather, of course this is not true [laughs loudly], but this is what they want to hear. Once I used to tell them my grandfather fought along with Ché Guevara , now the Buena vista story works even better.[laughs again loudly] Yuniel, 22, Jinetero, PersCom 2003)

Buena Vista Social Club indeed became a major aspect of the “imagined community” used by locals as an interface for interaction with tourists. As Baker puts it, “many young *habaneros* are well aware of the images of their country that are being promoted to tourists: they have a strong sense of living in “an imagined community for others” (2006:236). In the gay *ambiente* this sense of living in “an imagined community”

gets a special meaning and an extra layer, since the "gay community" in Havana, or the *ambiente*, is, too, in a certain sense, "an imagined community".

Appendix VII: Sacred *batá* drums--for heterosexual men only?

There are three major taboos regarding homosexuals in *santería*. These taboos concern women as well, and some *babalaos* I spoke with saw the homosexual taboo as an extension of the female one. Traditionally, a *babalao*, an *ifá* (diagnostic diviner), and a sacred *batá* drums player cannot be a woman or a homosexual (Pérez y Mina 1998:20). According to Agawu, the gender taboo is inherited from Africa, where in many societies sacred drumming has always been the exclusive preserve of men (1995:91). However, Vincent observes that “in Nigeria, this is a social exclusion, whereas in Cuba it is a religious taboo” (2006:137). Vincent claims that the religious taboo against any physical contact with the consecrated *batá* is Cuban, and does not originate in Africa (2006:159), where “[t]he fact that female *batá* drumming is not normative, does not mean it is taboo” (ibid.).

Sacred *batá* drums (*fundamento*) contain *añá*, a spiritual mysterious force given to them by an *orisha* which is sealed inside the drum. They do not sound any different from non-sacred *batá*; the difference is only spiritual (Sublette 2004:229). Two of the main explanations for the fact women should not play the sacred *batá* are pollution via menstruation and interference with impregnation. I was intrigued therefore that this “taboo” was extended to “homosexuals” who obviously neither menstruate nor can be impregnated. One of the answers I often received was the “masculinity” which is encoded in the drums. “The drum connotes phallic power among many cultures,” writes Rey (2006:119); Corenlius describes the *batá* experience as “a divine womb fertilized by the phallic driving of the drummer’s hands” (1995:27). In order to make the *batá* work, the drummers need, therefore, to be masculine and bearers of a phallic energy which can fertilise the “divine womb”.

Vincent claims that *añá* prohibition arguments assume that homosexual men are “feminine” and embody negative female stereotypes, and quotes an informant who said: “The *batá* tradition was brought here by real men” (2006:189). She suggests that the non-negotiable exclusion of both women and homosexuals from playing the *batá* in Cuba is “a diasporic innovation” (ibid.:190), deriving from “the traumatising of gender relations of Africans in Cuba during and after slavery; and...the lateral influence of the hyper-

masculinised Ifá and Abakuá cults on the Aná cult” (ibid.). I would add to it the homophobic trends which arose from the regime’s doctrine and persecution of homosexuals in the 1960s and 1970s which further inflamed the anti-homosexual feelings and the taboo which already existing in the pre-Revolution era.

I asked eight sacred *batá* drummers and twelve heterosexuals the following: “Can gay men be sacred *batá* drummers?” All the drummers and ten (83%) of the *santeros* answered negatively. Three of the *santeros*, however, replied: “Not if they are openly gay,” by which they meant effeminate, indicating a social rather than a religious taboo. My second question was: “why?” Surprisingly, none of those who said a definite “no” provided a religiously based answer, but cited other reasons: “They are not strong enough”, or “They are prone to fall into a trance and get ‘mounted’ [possessed]”. Strangely enough, when gay *santeros* were asked the same question, they gave similar answers. Lázaro, a “gay-friendly” Yoruba scholar and *babalao* who has a majority of openly gay male devotees in his “house” explained:

The role of the *bataleros* is complicated and demands high concentration. They have to memorise and repeat accurately the rhythmic patterns of each *orisha* and its variations, and furthermore they need to interact with each other in complete coordination to create a complicated interlocking polyrhythm. The role of the women and the homosexuals is to be “mounted,” i.e., possessed, therefore they are not suited to playing the *batá*, which provides the technical “channeling” for the possession, and has to be detached from the dances and the possession itself (PersCom 2005).

According to Lázaro and other *santeros* with whom I discussed this, both “social genders” work on two different coordinated levels during the ceremony – males (*batá*) set the interlocking rhythm therefore have to work as a team and be as accurate as “clockwork”; females (of both sexes as per the “social sex theory,” i.e. women and EPH) – dance and hope to get possessed, therefore they work solo “in their own world” and improvise. This system can be compared to a line of set rhythm with a line of a solo instrument improvising over it. Both are needed to create the piece of music, but it must be played by two different musicians. The reaction of one of my gay *santero* informants from Lázaro’s “house” to the possibility of homosexual *batá* players was: “We don’t want to play them [the *batá*]. That is for real men. Each one has his role. An effeminate *batá* player would be as ridiculous as a *macho guajiro* (peasant) dancing like Yemayá”

(Amed, PersCom 2005). When I challenged Lázaro “Don’t you think this is a case of gender and sexuality based discrimination?” he replied:

It’s the other way around – the male *batá* drummers are only service providers, drumming is a hard work and they have to maintain their concentration throughout the ceremony, to communicate with the *orishas* only to open the door for the possessed, who make the full contact with them [the *orishas*] and are mounted by them. They do all the hard work, but the privileged role is that of the possessed (PersCom 2005).

Appendix VIII: A historical perspective of homosexuality in *santería*

One of the most acrimonious academic debates in Yoruba studies since the 1970s is the Matory-Oyewumi one over the status of gender in Yoruba culture (Matory 2008:516), a debate which is highly relevant to understanding gender principles in the context of *santería*. Nigerian-born US scholar Oyeronke Oyewumi strongly opposes Matory's theory regarding the gender schemes in Yoruba culture and cosmology and the way they formulate models based on gender-manipulation and transvestism. She argues that gender in the Western sense has no significance in Yoruba culture and demonstrates it by looking at Yoruba vocabulary. Gender distinctions and hierarchy, according to Oyewumi, were introduced to Yoruba culture by colonialism (Oyewumi 1997:xiii).

Even if this is the case, *santería* is a syncretic religion, a post-colonialism phenomenon, shaped and influenced by colonialism and Catholicism, which may explain why gender *and* sexuality play an important role in it. I argue that the complexity, ambiguity and flexibility of gender and sexuality in *santería* is a result of its hybrid “transcultural” status, influenced both by the low hierarchical status of gender in pre-colonial Yoruba culture as indicated by *oyewumi* and by colonialism, slavery and the enforcement of catholic morals regarding strict gender hierarchy and sexual taboos upon the diasporic Yoruba people. Here, in the transcultural process that occurred in Cuba, lies the secret of the phenomenon discussed in this chapter, the complex gender/sexuality system of *santería*'s cosmology, and the space it provides for gay men. Elaborating on this point, I'd present this simple equation: If a group of people comes from a tradition that does not make a strong social distinction between man and woman, and therefore allows multiple gender options, including transgender and effeminate men, but is being forcefully transferred into a patriarchal society which strongly emphasises gender roles and distinction, the result will be a new hybrid culture which cultivates different gender options and sexualities but also allocates them specific roles, and puts together homosexual effeminate men with women, as per Dianteill's “social sex” theory.

Not only that gender perception in Yoruba culture (as reflected in *santería* mythology) is not necessarily binary, but it is also of much less social importance than in Eurocentric culture which puts gender high in the hierarchy above all other definitions, such as age, kinship, and even religion and race.²⁰²² In Eurocentric societies

since babyhood “boys are blue and girls are pink”, and throughout life one is first defined as “male” or “female”. In official documents in the “Western” world, the male/female checkbox comes before those for age, marital status, race, or religion. According to Oyewumi Yoruba culture is more concerned with age and kinship distinctions than with gender (Oyewumi 1997:157). The young and the elders are socially divided groups, with different social status and roles, a stricter division than the male/female one. Lázaro, a *babalao* and Yoruba scholar whom I met in Havana in 2005, told me that in Yoruba and Yoruba-diasporic society, an elder who tried to dress and behave like a youth would be viewed in a stranger and more negative light than a male-to-female cross-dresser.

This different attitude manifests itself in different male/female conceptualisation, and allows ambivalence and overlapping of roles and relationships, both in religious and secular life ..

Matory emphasises the diversity of female roles and power roles in Yoruba society, the ways in which they overlap with men's powers, the way these differ from the arrangements of roles and powers in other societies, and the way in which male-female difference and interrelations are projected metaphorically onto other social and symbolic relationships (Matory 2003: 430–431).

To summarise this point, I argue that as a result of the dual, and conflicting, cultural background (pre-colonial Yorubaland on one side, and colonialism, slavery and “catholisation” on the other) gender and sexuality distinctions in the world of *santería* are indeed important and functional, especially when it comes to the ritual “performance” aspect of *santería* as demonstrated in chapter 10, but at the same time, in certain aspects of the religion, its cosmology, philosophy and worship, can be flexible, changeable and multiple.

An interesting source about homosexuality in slave society is Miguel Barnet’s *Biografía de un Cimarrón (Biography of a Runaway Slave)*, which traces the life-story of Esteban Montejo (1860–1973). According to Montejo, same-sex relations were practised among African-Cuban male slaves in the nineteenth century because of the scarcity of women, but not only: “others [non-celibate men] had sex with each other and didn’t want anything to do with women. Sodomy, that was their life” (Barnet 1994:40). Montejo,

however, insists, as the elders say, that this tendency “did not originate from Africa”, that is, it is not a cultural Yoruba phenomenon, but developed in the Diaspora. He himself excludes himself from this homosexual activity, but expresses a typical lenient attitude towards it: “It never mattered to me, sincerely, I believe that everyone marches to his own drummer” (ibid.:40,41), and describes the homosexuals as “good workers” who “washed clothes, and if they had a husband, they also cooked for him” (ibid.:40). It is interesting to note that this lenient approach frequently emerged during my conversation with various *babalaos* and *santeros*, including those who seemed to generally disapprove of homosexuality and disagree with the connection I made between homosexuality and *santería*. In fact, I have encountered more “anti-gay” *babalaos* in the USA than in Cuba. Conner reports similar reactions: “I was told more than once, typically in a patronising tone, ‘It’s not an issue’ or ‘It’s not a problem’”; (2004:106). Barnet claims that the widespread condemnation of homosexuality only surfaced during the post-slavery period in Cuba (Barnet 1994:40).

Cuban anthropologist and *santería* expert Lydia Cabrera provided an interesting insight into homosexuality in *santería* in Cuba in the early 1950s, although using archaic terminology such as the biblical term “*el pecado nefando*” (the abominable sin) and “*invertidos*” (inverted, reversed) for homosexuals, and sometimes even expressing Catholic/homophobic views (in spite of the fact she herself was lesbian, and in later years, when residing in Miami, quite open about it). Cabrera was the most authoritative figure and possibly the first to document homosexuality both in *santería* mythology and practice. In her 1954 classic *El Monte (The Wilderness)*, the first major anthropological work about African-Cuban religions and traditions, which some *santeros* described to me as the “bible of *santería*”, she refers to the phenomenon’s long tradition: “Since long ago it has been known that the abominable sin was very common in Regla Lucumí [*santería*]”(my translation).²⁶⁰ Cabrera tells the story of Papá Colás, a well-known homosexual and controversial figure in the *santería* world in Havana during the late

²⁶⁰ “Desde muy atrás se registra el pecado nefando como algo muy frecuente en la Regla lucumí” (Cabrera 1983[1954]:56).

nineteenth century, known for his extravagant and scandalous behaviour. Colás “was a famous homosexual [*invertido*], and by surprising a naive priest, got married disguised as a woman, with another homosexual” (my translation).²⁶¹

She describes the growing “trend” of homosexual *santeros* in the 1950s:

At present, the percentage of pederasts [meaning homosexuals] in *santería* (not so in other sects which derive from the Congo, which despise them deeply and expels them), seems to be so big that it is an ongoing subject of motive of indignation for the old *santeros* and devotees. “Every step you take, you stumble across [a homosexual] with his *merengüeto*! [small meringue, slang for young male lover]”. (my translation)²⁶²

Furthermore, as will be shown in the following section, Cabrera recorded homosexual stories related to the *orishas* themselves in the oral mythology of *santería*.

In 1984 and 1985 Arguelles and Rich published two groundbreaking essays in the US feminist journal *Signs*, titled “Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Revolution: Notes toward an Understanding of the Cuban Lesbian and Gay Male Experience” (Pt. 1:1984, Pt. 2:1985), which include references to *santería* practices in Cuba.

Since the 1990s, outside Cuba there has been a growing interest and research in the area of gender and sexuality in African-diasporic religion, focusing mainly on Brazilian *candomblé*. There are many similarities between *candomblé* and *santería* and they can be looked upon as “sister religions” being both of a similar origin, a similar pantheon of *orishas*, practices, philosophies, and social statues. Both are the most widespread religious forms of African-diasporic religions in their respective societies, and in recent years have been appropriated by the establishment in their countries as neo-folklorist “national heritage” symbols and tourist attractions, thus providing an interesting ground for investigation into larger socio-psychological systems within their societies. The literature on gender and sexuality in *candomblé* can therefore shed a light on the case of *santería*, and for that reason I have chosen to use writings about *candomblé* as a point of

²⁶¹ “Era famoso invertido y sorprendiendo la candidez de un cura, casó disfrazado de mujer, con otro invertido” (ibid.).

²⁶² “Actualmente, la proporción de pederastas en Ocha (no así en las sectas que se reclaman de congos, en las que se les desprecia profundamente y de las que se les explusa) parece ser tan numerosa que es motivo que es motivo continuo de indignación para los viejos santeros y devotos; A cada paso se tropieza uno un partido con su merengüeteo!” (ibid.).

reference throughout this chapter, including some historic essays (Carneiro 1940, Landes 1940, Herskovits 1956).

Back in the 1940s Ruth Landes noted that the majority of the male leaders and followers of *candomblé* "are passive homosexuals of note" (Landes 1947:434). Landes's theory about the place of homosexuals in *candomblé* was controversial at its time, and criticised by many of her contemporaries. However, since the 1990s further researches have been published (for example: Fry 1995; Matory 2003 and 2005) confirming Landes's theory on the integral, rather than coincidental, homosexual presence in *candomblé*, and developing it further. Since then, homosexuality in *candomblé* has been well researched, though not so in Cuban *santería*. Most of the published work specifically about homosexuality in *santería* is focused on its practice in the United States (Vidal-Ortiz 2005a and 2005b, Conner 2004), and not in Cuba. The lack of work on homosexuality in *santería* in Cuba, can be a reason for the "closure" of Cuban society and of *santería* practice in Cuba to foreigners until the mid-1990s, and the conservatism of local, state-controlled, research (with the exception of Fernández Robaina 1994, and Sierra Madero 2006). In Chapter 9 of this thesis I intend to fill this gap, and bring the homosexual elements in *santería* practice in Cuba "out of the closet".

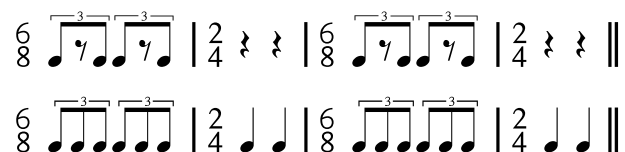
Appendix IX: Pello's transcriptions of *toques*

Here are examples of “phase I” patterns from *toques* transcribed and given to me by Pedro Pablo “Pello” Tapanez Gonzales, master drummer of the group Afrocuba de Matanzas (Matanzas 2003).²⁶³ Unlike most transcriptions I found of *batá* music (Amira and Cornelius 1999, Schweitzer 2003) which combine both the *enú* (“mouth”, larger drumhead) and the *chachá* (“butt”, smaller drumhead) of each drum in one transcribed line differentiated by the pitch, Pello's transcriptions are descriptive and analytical (for teaching and analysing purposes), and therefore features each drumhead part separately. Thus, each drum part is written in two separate lines, one for each drumhead.

Toque de Oggún

In the *akónkolo* part: alteration between 6/8 meter with 3 beat units and 2/4 meter with duple units, whilst the others play at 4/4 meter:

okónkolo



itótele



iyá



acheré



²⁶³ See details about pello: <http://www.afrocubaweb.com/pellotapanez.htm>

Toque de Oggún

The *itótele* part is in 3/4 meter with a pattern of 2 beat units in one hand and 3 beat units in the other, while the others are in 4/4 meter.

okónkolo



itótele



iyá



acheré



Toque de San Lázaro (Babalu Ayé)

The *iyá* part is in 6/8 meter with three beat units alternating with 2 beat units (see third bar). The others are in 4/4 meter

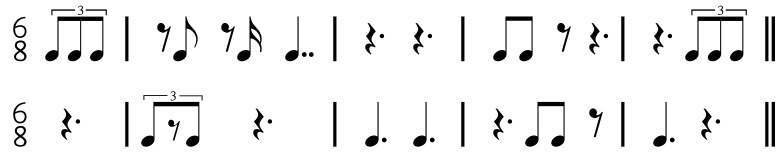
okónkolo



itótele



iyá



acheré



(Based on manual transcriptions by Pello)



Old Havana 2007. Last day of fieldwork... (Photo: Moshe Morad)

